FIVE COMPLETE NOVELS IN THIS ISSUE

JULY

15¢

STAR WESTERN

BIGGER AND BE[TTER] OF THE WEST!

RIDE WIDE OF BUZZARD WELL! by WALT COBURN

HELL IN THEIR WAR-SACKS! by CHARLES W. TYLER

ROAN ERNENWEIN AND OTHERS!

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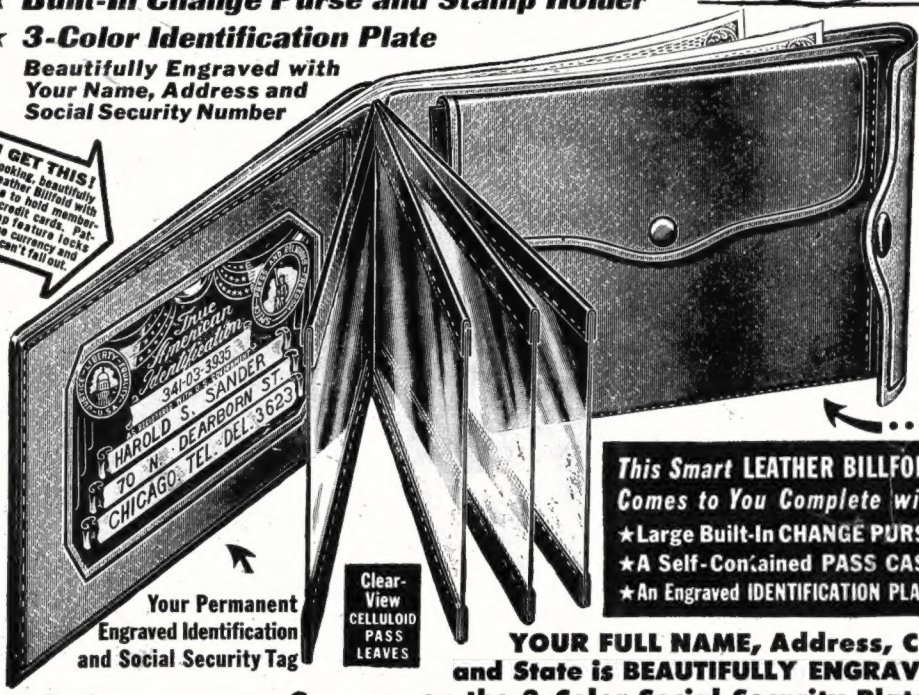

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DeLuxe **VALUE**

Smart **STYLING**

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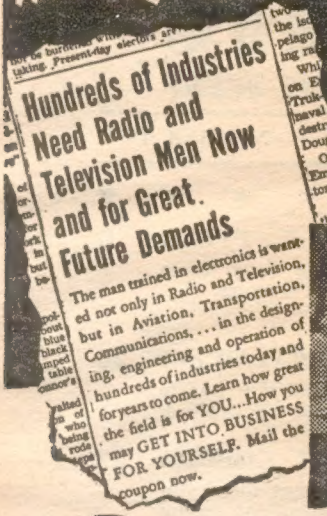
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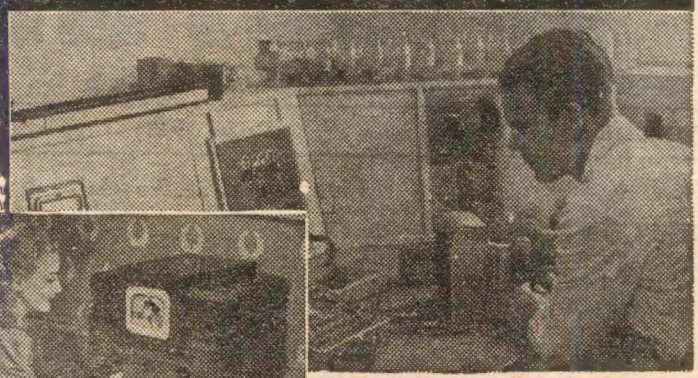

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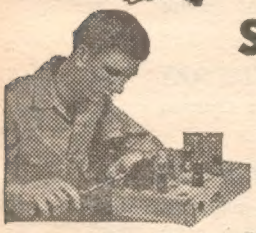

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FIVE SHORT NOVELS IN THIS ISSUE

STAR WESTERN

BIGGER AND BETTER STORIES OF THE WEST

VOLUME THIRTY-SIX JULY, 1945 NUMBER TWO

★ ★ ★ ★ ★ Five Complete Novels ★ ★ ★ ★ ★

HELL IN THEIR WAR-SACKS!.....*CHARLES W. TYLER* 8
A deadly little game of *ley fuga* awaited those three trouble-shooting Lazy Cross hellions, Dewlap, Wattles and the Hairpin Kid, in slumbering, sinister Tuscarosa. . . . With each of the trio tagged "it" for a bullet's sudden back-slap!

BULLET-MIRACLE AT THE CIRCLE S.....*L. ERNENWEIN* 26
After those bleak years in Yuma, Melody Mike Burdette's consuming ambition was to play one last deadly trigger-tune, for which both his enemy and himself must pay in blood.

RIDE WIDE OF BUZZARD WELL!.....*WALT COBURN* 42
Ranger Tubac Jones could only gamble his lone pair of black sixes against the death-cards of a fabulous range-queen's killer crew—with a cattleland bloodstained empire at stake!

FREE WATER—OR FIGHT!.....*ROD PATTERSON* 62
Could Dave Stelsa strike back at Big Phil Magoon . . . . And thereby reap a crimson harvest of dead hopes—and dead hoemen?

THE BULLSNAKE BEND REBELLION.....*TOM ROAN* 78
Andy Spurlock took on a deadly chore, turning that risky range into a flaming holocaust of hate, which not even the blood of all those honest fugitives could extinguish!

★ ★ ★ Star Features ★ ★ ★

THE BRANDING CORRAL.....*CONDUCTED BY STRAWBOSS* 6
Where the gang gathers around the friendly fire, to swap good talk about the West.

OLD ROUGH AND READY.....*HARRY VAN DEMARK* 41
Those hard-bitten '49ers were ready to defend their nugget-laden bonanza to the death!

UP THE TRAIL.....*A DEPARTMENT* 98
Courage is not always proven with Colts!

AUGUST ISSUE OUT JULY 11TH!

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DISCOUNT TO DISCHARGED VETERANS—SPECIAL TUITION RATES FOR MEMBERS OF THE ARMED FORCES

★ The Branding Corral ★

Conducted by Strawboss

WHEN a new town sprang into being in our early West, two signs were wont to appear ahead of all others. One, of course, read, "Saloon." The other said, "Bank." A. Lawson Manning, a Kansan who has made a specialty of pioneer finance, writes to the Branding Corral of the latter institution.

Dear Strawboss:

Genuine wildcats were not the only kind that preyed on citizens of our pioneer West. Another variety were the so-called "wildcat banks" which in the early days of our country's history popped up like weeds at the slightest provocation.

Many of these so-called banks operated without charters, and depended for soundness on the integrity and honor, if any, of the men behind them. One such banker confessed frankly:

> "Well, I didn't have much else to do, so I rented an empty store and painted 'bank' on the window. The first day I was open for business a man came in and deposited one hundred dollars. The second day another deposited two hundred and fifty dollars, and so along about the third day I got enough confidence in the bank to put in a hundred myself."

Even chartered banks were started with practically no capital, more often than not. In DeSoto, Nebraska, there were two early banks. One did boast of an office, safe and cashier, but the other had nothing to verify its existence beyond the name, "Waubeck," engraved on its bills. Nevertheless, this bank, which was operated by non-residents and held no charter, issued more than $200,000 in notes.

When the Bank of Nebraska at Omaha closed its doors, a writ of execution by the county sheriff showed the following "assets": "Thirteen sacks of flour, one large iron safe, one counter, one desk, one stove drum and pipe, three arm chairs and one map of Douglas County."

Typical of the "high finance" methods of the day was the system under which the Platte Valley Bank at Nebraska City and the Nemaha Valley Bank in Brownsville were operated. If a customer called at the Platte Valley Bank to redeem one hundred dollars of its money, the cashier would calmly toss out one hundred crisp bills—of the Nemaha Valley Bank. If the person seeking the money took his request to the Nemaha Valley Bank, he would get one hundred dollars of the Platte Valley Bank's specie! If the customer requested money for use in the East, the cashier would readily hand him a roll of Omaha Bank bills. Actually, this money was worthless in the East, although it was used extensively throughout the West.

Of all the banks in Nebraska, chartered and unchartered, which operated prior to 1857, only the Platte Valley Bank proved to be sound.

A pair of Indiana swindlers worked a very successful scheme. At various points throughout the West they circulated bank notes issued by the Orleans Bank of Connelton, Indiana. Along with the notes, they issued a "currency detector magazine," which ostensibly offered citizens valuable advice as to acceptable and unacceptable specie of the time. Naturally, the Orleans Bank money was given a very satisfactory rating, although it was, in fact, completely worthless.

These shrewd scoundrels had, under the name Orleans Bank, issued notes to a total amount of $13,346, then had shut up shop with the following assets:

Whitewash	$2.00
Two boards	.50
One old plank	.18
One iron safe	75.00
Total	$77.68

The use to which the "whitewash" had been put should be obvious!

Despite the fact that the "currency detector" of the two shysters operating the Orleans "Bank" was a swindle, there were legitimate services of this kind available. Thompson's Bank Note Reporter was issued weekly—probably a good thing!—and Peterson's Philadelphia Counterfeit Detector and Bank Note List was a monthly serving the same general purpose.

Pioneer finance had more "drawbacks" than "greenbacks!"

An interesting sidelight on the gun speed of Wild Bill Hickok, often credited with being the Old West's fastest and surest man with a six-shooter, comes from Del Santvoordt, a Kentuckian by birth, but a citizen of the great State of Utah by adoption.

Dear Strawboss:

A great many stories of the gun speed of

(Continued on page 92)

"Oh, she's OLD! Almost thirty!"

At twenty, thirty seems ancient.

At thirty, forty is distant middle age.

At forty, well, it'll be a long time before you're fifty.

The point is that ten years *ahead* always seems like a long time. Yet, actually it passes "before you know it" . . . and you find yourself face to face with problems, opportunities, needs, that once seemed very far in the future.

This is a good thing to remember today, when you buy War Bonds to speed the winning of the war.

In ten years—*only* ten years—those bonds will bring you back $4 for every $3 you put into them today.

Think of what that money may mean to you in 1955. An education for your children . . . a home . . . maybe even retirement to the place and the life of your heart's desire.

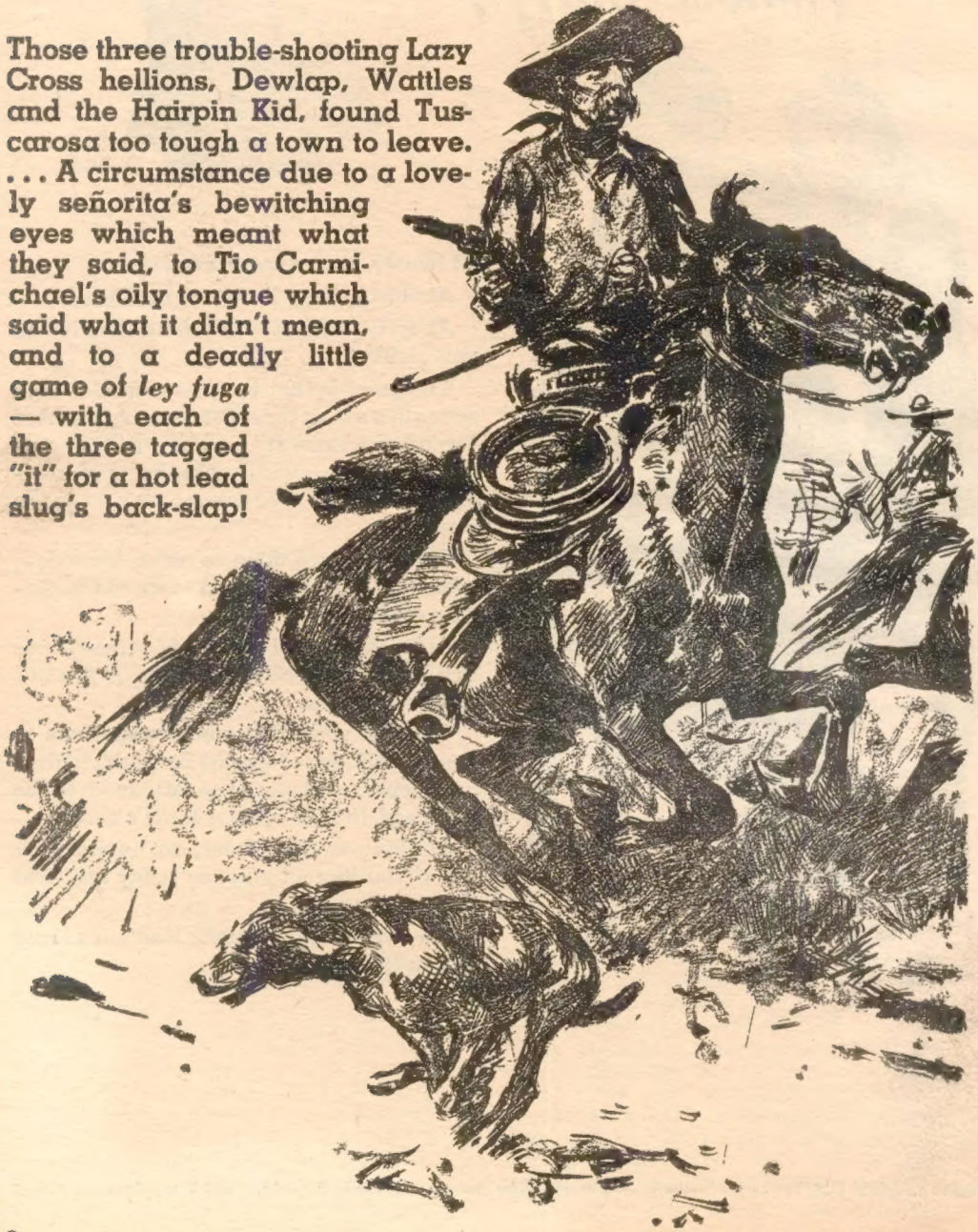
All this your War Bonds can mean to you . . . if you buy all you can today and hold them to maturity.

It won't be long till 1955. Not half as long as you think.

This is an official U.S. Treasury advertisement—prepared under auspices of Treasury Department and War Advertising Council

HELL IN THEIR WAR-SACKS!

Those three trouble-shooting Lazy Cross hellions, Dewlap, Wattles and the Hairpin Kid, found Tuscarosa too tough a town to leave. . . . A circumstance due to a lovely señorita's bewitching eyes which meant what they said, to Tio Carmichael's oily tongue which said what it didn't mean, and to a deadly little game of *ley fuga* — with each of the three tagged "it" for a hot lead slug's back-slap!



By Charles W. Tyler

Action-Packed Novel of Three Fighting Border-hoppers

Wattles hauled out his six-shooter and fired. "Ye-e-ow!" howled Dewlap.

CHAPTER ONE

Six-Shooter Serenade!

THEY were three hellions from Texas—a pair of ringy old sin-twisters and a button—Dewlap, Wattles and the Hairpin Kid.

It had all begun back in the high-riding days of the Lazy Cross. A scrawny, freckled little range waif had come drifting in with the tumbleweeds, and old Luther Tuttle had put him to choring around for his keep.

Dewlap and Wattles, the two oldsters of the outfit, had immediately taken the kid under their wings, teaching him the facts of life,

which included riding, roping and triggernometry. Because he was soon attempting to fork everything in horse hide around the place, they called him the Hairpin Kid. Thus, he had acquired a name, and two fathers.

That had been eight years ago. The Kid was twenty now, a bit undersized, but tough as whang-leather and plenty wise. But to Dewlap and Wattles, he was still "the button."

Dewlap and Wattles were scraggy and grizzled, with hoar-frost on hair and mustache—and youth in their souls. Restive as the winds that blow on the Texas plains, they were, for the last trail herd had gone north, and the great drives were done.

Dewlap and Wattles were sad. Texas had tamed the West. It looked like they would henceforth have to confine their saloon-busting activities to the more or less chastened local communities.

And then their hairy old ears caught the first far mutterings of guns a-smoke on the Border, down Mexico way. Pronto, their spurs were a-jangle and their calloused rumps were warming the saddle-leather. And Dewlap and Wattles, accompanied by the Hairpin Kid, were sloping for the Rio Grande . . . .

Tuscarosa town dozed in the sun like an old crone, her lidded eyes a-dream with wickedness. Beyond the sprawl of frame and adobe buildings lay the sluggish Rio Grande, and beyond the river reached the plains and the blue-curtained mother mountains of Mexico, the Sierra Madres.

In these mountains to the south, revolution was stirring. Here Don Ignacio, whom some called a patriot and others a bandit, was plotting to free 300,000 peons from the yoke of their feudal masters—Don Ignacio, and a then youthful and fiery *caballero*, Francisco Villa.

A motley army was in the making. *Sin tierra y sin ley.* The landless and the lawless. A building legion of vengeance—awaiting the arrival of the new .44-40 magazine Winchesters and those precious boxes of ammunition, cunningly cached in this courtyard in Tuscarosa. Guns and cartridges that for a year or more had been filtering in by way of the underground.

Now, as towns go, Tuscarosa wasn't much—just a sleepy Border town, with its mixture of gringos and Mexicans; its poverty and rags; its owlhooters and wanted men, hovering just one fast jump from the Border.

In Tuscarosa, there were strumming guitars and songs and laughter—and sudden death.

And there was Conchita Jones . . . .

UNDER the noonday sun, heat bore down and the bare earth squirmed with dancing dust devils. Dogs sprawled in the shade, and *paisanos* drowsed beneath corn-straw sombreros. The *cantinas* were silent. A few peni-tents knelt in the church of Guadalupe, at the edge of the Plaza Del Sol. Flies droned a *siesta* lullaby, and Tuscarosa was given over to peace and quiet.

And then came Dewlap, Wattles and the Hairpin Kid, riding three abreast up Cimarron Street, to rein in near the venerable pafron saint, keeping vigil in the plaza.

Dewlap combed trail dust from his scraggy mustache and viewed the peaceful scene with a jaundiced eye, feeling keenly the lack of enthusiasm over their arrival.

"Don't these *paisanos* savvy we're notorious kerackters?" said Wattles.

"Announce us," said Dewlap.

Wattles hauled out his six-shooter and fired into the air.

"Ye-e-ow!" howled Dewlap.

A fat, bald little man, asleep in a back-tilted chair, opened one eye, regarding the strangers with disapproval; then closed it. A flea-bitten dog raised up its head, blinked and went to sleep again. A straw sombrero lifted, a *serape* stirred, a horse at a hitch-rail stomped—and Tuscarosa resumed its *siesta*.

Conchita Jones, crossing the plaza, paused, eyeing the dust-mantled trio with bright curiosity. The Hairpin Kid stared. The girl, he thought, was the prettiest thing he had ever seen. Slim as a willow, she was, with curves where they were meant to be, a rich, olive-skinned oval face and lips as red and lush as a ripe strawberry. She looked Spanish, but when she spoke her voice was as American as apple pie.

"What's all the shooting about?" asked Conchita Jones.

"Jist was a-wonderin' if this here was a town or a graveyard?" said Dewlap.

"Which were you looking for, pappy?" Conchita Jones had a way of looking at a man, the Hairpin Kid noticed, sorta like you'd point a gun. "We have both, and we aim to please."

"We're a-howlin' wolfs from Simon Crick," announced Wattles, "an' we figger to take the lid off."

Conchita Jones smiled—well, not exactly a smile. Her lips seemed to toy with the idea, but her eyes disputed it. "Some have taken the lid off Tuscarosa," said the girl, "and some were under it when it was put on again. A coffin lid."

"Where we come from," said Dewlap, "a jigger says his prayers with his sixgun cocked."

Conchita Jones shifted her eyes to the Hairpin Kid, giving him a brief flash of white teeth. "The old ones are full of ginger," she said.

Dewlap and Wattles looked at one another. The Hairpin Kid grinned at the girl.

"I am Conchita Jones," said the girl, her hands on her slim hips, her head set at a saucy angle. "And who might you *pelados* be?"

"They call me the Hairpin Kid. These are my pards, Dewlap an' Wattles."

"Heerd they was a war on down thisaway," said Dewlap, "but it don't look it." And he gazed around contemptuously.

"Mebbe we could hook on with some outfit hereabouts," suggested the Kid.

Conchita Jones regarded them thoughtfully, her strawberry lips drawing into a pucker. "My Uncle Carmichael is a man of large interests," she said. "Perhaps he will have use for you."

Dewlap and Wattles, however, were not listening, for they had spotted a sign, reading, *Cantina de Jubilo,* and they were reminded that it had been a long time between drinks. They set spur to their broncs and pointed up to the hitch-rail.

The Kid remained behind to talk with Conchita Jones, whose dark beauty had mesmerized him.

"I will speak to Tio Carmichael," she was saying, "when he has finished his siesta. Those who do his bidding, he pays well."

"Is he a cattleman?" the Kid asked.

"*Si.* He also has other interests. There are things of greater worth than fat beeves."

"What?"

"*Terra y libertad!*"

The Kid was puzzled. "You're a queer one, Conchita," he said, "but I like yuh." Blushing furiously at his boldness, he started off to join Dewlap and Wattles, and tell them that a job was as good as assured.

Conchita Jones looked after him, her lips smiling a little, her eyes thinly derisive. These gringos were stupid, but her uncle, no doubt, could use them in the cause of Don Ignacio and the boy liberator who called himself Pancho Villa. She thought of the rifles and ammunition, which would be paid for in fat steers when they were delivered to the revolutionists south of the Rio Grande.

DEWLAP and Wattles swaggered into the Cantina de Jubilo, their nostrils drinking in the familiar reek of alcohol as they slapped off trail dust. The bar was close to deserted, with only two or three hangers-on slumped in chairs at the back. A heavy-jowled figure in a soiled apron was tidying up behind the bar.

This, they learned later, was the proprietor, one Sockem O'Brien. He rolled his bulging eyes at the prospective customers, seeing a pair of apparently harmless old cow prods, and bobbed his head briefly.

Dewlap and Wattles lay against the bar and began an appraisal of the assortment of strange labels ranged on the back-bar counter. There was *mescal, aguardiente, de caña, sotol, vino, tequila* and other highly decorative bottles. With plenty of good American whiskey available, the two old cow pokes had always shied away from these strange Mex concoctions.

"Whiskey," said Dewlap.

"The same," said Wattles.

Sockem O'Brien eyed them with disdain. "Whiskey is only medicine for weaklin's," he said.

Dewlap scowled. He felt that the bartender was casting aspersions on his drinking habits. "Where we come from," he stated, "whiskey's potent war-paint."

"You ain't seen nothin', if ye ain't drunk *tequila.*"

"Sot 'er out, podner," said Wattles. "We ain't proud."

Sockem O'Brien placed a bottle of colorless fluid on the bar, along with glasses.

"She's powerful pale," said Dewlap.

"Looks watered to me," remarked Wattles. "Bet I could drink the hull business in one swalley." Disdaining a glass, he tilted the bottle to his lips and guzzled a heavy charge.

Dewlap wet his lips thirstily. A man with dust in his craw would drink anything.

Suddenly, Wattles reeled back from the bar, his Adam's-apple caught up under his jawbone, his eyes glassy, his mustache horns a-quiver. Dropping the bottle, he clutched at his gaunt belly, choked, gasped, gagged, and shuddered.

"What's got into ye, ye ole varmint?" demanded Dewlap.

Sockem O'Brien banged his fist on the bar. "Haw!" he jeered.

"I'm shot!" screeched Wattles, pawing for his six-shooter. Where there had been but one figure behind the bar, his weeping eyes now found half a dozen skulkers, an illusion resulting partly from his own optical convulsions and partly from the blurred reflections of the bartender and Dewlap.

Certain that he was under attack, and clearly outnumbered, Wattles poured a slug into the ranks of the enemy. Came an explosion of bottles, while the back-bar mirror flowered into a pattern of jagged fractures.

Sockem O'Brien, infuriated by this wanton destruction, grabbed a bung-starter from beneath the counter and skirted the end of the bar.

Dewlap jerked at his hog-leg, and cast about for the dastardly one who had dry-gulched his old pard.

Because Tuscarosa was a place of frequent violence, two worthies in cotton pants at the back, their *siesta* disturbed by gunfire, sprouted into action, with Colts erupting from their holsters.

Seeing the plainly hostile activity of these gentry, Dewlap let fly in their general direction, but his aim was hurried and the bullet only blasted splinters from a table.

Wattles was still pumping lead across the bar, his innards a fiery furnace.

A huge, lumbering bouncer, employed by

Mr. O'Brien to aid in keeping the peace, surged through a doorway at the near end of the bar and threw a flying tackle at Dewlap. They crashed to the floor. Wattles was caught in a wild avalanche of flying arms and legs and bowled over. Before he could regain his feet he had been pole-axed by the in-charging bartender, who, for good measure, also belted Dewlap over the head. . . .

THE Hairpin Kid, still a little drunk from the wine in the eyes of Conchita Jones, was sobered by the sounds of the fray. His two godfathers, it seemed, were in the process of making their debut socially in Tuscarosa.

Almost in a twinkling, the Plaza Del Sol was swarming with hard-bitten men, moving toward the saloon. The Kid couldn't understand it. In the trail towns he had known up north, gunfire in a barroom would hardly have caused a ripple in the normal life of the community. But Tuscarosa, apparently, was set to a hair-trigger.

The Hairpin Kid sensed wicked undercurrents—as though, perhaps, the bloody war and intrigue south of the Rio Grande had set its roots in this Texas town.

Had not Conchita Jones spoken of the peons, rallying to the cause of a hombre named Don Ignacio and that fierce boy *insurrecto,* Pancho Villa? These names had already struck terror in the souls of men along the Rio Grande. Without doubt, they had henchmen here in Tuscarosa.

Guns were a-smoke yonder, and Dewlap and Wattles, no doubt, were in trouble. The Hairpin Kid didn't like the looks of it; there were too many gun-toters on the prowl hereabouts.

His loyalty to his pards a spur that drove him to instant action, the Hairpin Kid raced his pony toward the cantina, flung his gaunt body from the saddle and set his back against the adobe wall near the door.

Men were closing in—hard-bitten men. Border cases. Guns were rocking the Cantina de Jubilo. These strangers. . . . *Enemigos,* perhaps; spies. . . .

The Kid's sombrero was thrust back on his unruly yellow locks, his six-shooter swinging before him.

"Git back, or I'll blow yore guts through yore spine!"

The rush of savage-faced men wavered, halted. A raw-boned figure with a flat nose and wide nostrils came from a doorway and strode forward, a deputy's star caught on his soiled cotton shirt. His lidded eyes were bright, hard.

"Put away that gun, yuh young hellion."

The Kid's peaked features had the edge of an ax; his washed-out blue eyes were smoky.

"I'm standin' pat. Yuh got openers, Mister?"

The shooting and wild thrashing in the saloon had quit. Dewlap an' Wattles would be sidin' him now. There were oaths, the shuffling of feet inside.

"Hey! Dewlap! Wattles! Where are yuh?"

But there was no answering word from the oldsters. Terror, desperation laid hold of the Kid. He wet his dry lips with his tongue. His eyes slid up and down the street. Conchita Jones was coming that way, a quirt in her hand, her lithe hips swiveling provocatively.

The Kid breathed a bit easier. Conchita had mentioned a job. She had boasted that her Uncle Carmichael was a man of importance. Conchita's roguish eyes had smiled at him—Conchita was his friend. . . .

CHAPTER TWO

Double-Cross

CONCHITA JONES glanced into the saloon, while the stolid faces on the sidewalk watched her with deference. She turned then, giving the Hairpin Kid a funny little smile.

"How brave you are," she said, patting her skirt with the quirt.

"Look," the Kid gritted, "git this wolf-pack off'n me, or somebody is gointa git hurt."

"Big talk, *muchacho,*" said Conchita. "The old ones made big talk, also. They are in there on the floor."

The Kid's lips were suddenly a pale scar across his lean face. "I'll git somebody fer this!"

A gun muzzle poked from the bat-wing doors, lining on the Kid. Behind it vicious eyes gleamed craftily.

Conchita said, "Holster that revolver!"

The Kid stared at her. "You on my neck, too?"

Conchita's arm lifted, struck—fast. The lash of the quirt snaked out and wrapped around the Colt with a snap. As the gun was jerked downward, the badge-toter sprang on the Kid, tore the six-shooter from his grasp, and would have struck the young cowpuncher in the face, had not Conchita caught the arm of the snarling deputy.

"I'll brain him!"

"No! put him in the jail," Conchita said. "The old ones, also." Her eyes laughed at the Kid, who was glaring at her savagely. "It could be worse, *amigo mio.* There are ways to unlock barred doors, but there is no escape from a coffin."

The Kid thought about that later, but at this moment he was too furious for words. . . .

Dewlap had a lump on his head the size of an apple. Old Wattles' scalp had been laid open by the bludgeon in the hands of Sockem O'Brien. Neither was too sure of what had happened.

"I'm all shot to hell," moaned Wattles, hunched on the edge of a cell bunk in the Tuscarosa jail. "They was a-layin' fer me behind them rocks."

"Ye're drunk!" snorted Dewlap. "There wa'n't no rocks. We was in a saloon."

"They was injuns, I tell ye," persisted Wattles.

"Yare," hooted Dewlap. "Teekeeley injuns! They was in a bottle, ye ole badger."

Wattles scrouged up his eyes, felt of his bloody head. "Lookit me, I been skelped."

"Shore," said Dewlap, "with a club. That there bartender done 'er." He explored the knob on his own cranium, winced. "It's what I git fer rackin' 'round with a ole catawampus."

The Hairpin Kid said, "We're in a mess."

Dewlap and Wattles looked at the Kid, seeming aware of his presence for the first time.

"Where the hell was you?" demanded Dewlap.

"Talkin' with this Conchita," the Kid said, wryly. "Out there in the plaza."

"Who's Conchita?" said Dewlap.

"What plaza?" croaked Wattles.

"Le's git goin'," growled Dewlap, who was hunched on the bunk beside his pard.

"What are we waitin' on?" Wattles swayed to his feet.

"Listen," said the Kid, "we ain't goin' no place. We're in the calaboose."

Dewlap's eyes searched out furtively from beneath shaggy brows. A square of sunlight lay on the puncheon floor. There were bars across it. Beyond that was a barred door. "Damn'f we ain't."

Wattles slapped his thigh. "I ain't got no more weepon than a pink-eyed rabbit."

Dewlap got up and shook the bars. "Le'me outta here!" he yowled.

The Hairpin Kid told of trying to hold off the badge-toter, and of his coming to grief at the hands of Conchita Jones.

"It's like I allus done tole ye, Button," said Wattles, "never have no truck with wimmen."

"They're slicker'n ca'f slobbers," said Dewlap.

The outer door of the jail opened, and the deputy came in. He was accompanied by a wizened figure, carrying a worn leather bag. "Sew up that old hellion's scalp," said the badge-wearer, unlocking the cell door.

The doc had a red nose, and looked the worse for wear. His watery eyes regarded the bloodied old cowpoke with brightening anticipation. "The damn undertaker funeralizes most of the cases from the Jubilo before I get a whack at 'em," he said. "I'll stitch you up in a jiffy."

"Git away from me, ye old pill-shaker!" squalled Wattles.

The doc searched a flagon from his bag, had a drink, then offered the fat bottle to his patient. "A stout horse for a hard ride."

Wattles eyed the label suspiciously. However, when he saw it was good old Texas whiskey—Big Bender—he snatched at the bottle and lowered the boom.

The doc rescued the bottle. "A couple of you get this old wrang-tang down and hold him."

When Wattles had been subdued, the doc poured whiskey on the wound, shaved away the hair and callously sewed up the gash, as one would mend a tear in a grain sack.

Having completed dressing the wound, the badge-toter let the doc out and turned the key. "Uncle Carmichael will be around to see you hombres after a spell," he told the prisoners; "yuh better lend an ear. He's head man in this pueblo."

The Hairpin Kid guessed that if Uncle Carmichael was anything like Conchita Jones, he'd probably be a tartar. Still, if he had a job for them, as the girl had suggested, it would mean release, and anything was better than the threat of summary Border justice. . . .

UNCLE Carmichael was a fat, jolly little man, with the eyes of a gazelle and the heart of a jackal. He arrived at the jail some time later, accompanied by Conchita, and stood eyeing the prisoners with the predatory speculation of a wily old coyote looking through a farm yard gate.

"This," said Conchita, "is Tio Carmichael." A thin smile haunted the strawberry lips.

"*Amigos,*" said Uncle Carmichael, "this is an outrage."

"We was ambushed," said Wattles.

"I was never so mortified in my life," put in Dewlap.

Uncle Carmichael rubbed his fat palms. "Allow me to extend to you the hospitality of Tuscarosa."

"I been in better jails," said Wattles.

"I shall see that you are released," said the fat man, "provided, in exchange for your freedom, you follow closely my instructions." His chubby features radiated friendliness. "Otherwise, you will be shot."

Dewlap and Wattles looked at each other. They had come to South Texas, hunting adventure. They had run smack into trouble, which was their dish. From now out they would have to use their heads for something beside hat-racks, or it might be their last pas-ear.

Dewlap rolled his eyes upward and stroked his oxhorn mustache. "She's a wicked world," he intoned, dolorously.

"We're jist pore innercent cow prods what was took in," lamented Wattles, wagging his aching head. "We are complete reformed."

"You *ladinos* fool no one," said Conchita.

The Hairpin Kid was thinking of what a Mexican vaquero had told him once—something about a thing that was called "*ley fuga*", or the law of flight, in which prisoners were given a chance to escape; then ruthlessly shot down.

The Hairpin Kid had had an awareness of sounds in the walled courtyard behind the jail—sounds made by spades. He glanced from the high, narrow opening, and saw peons lazily digging what appeared to be graves. "Hey, Dewlap! Look!"

Dewlap looked, and scratched his leathery old neck. "Figger them hombres is a-gittin' ready to do a leetle plantin'."

"And it is not corn, *amigo*," said the girl.

The Hairpin Kid stared at her, his eyes hot, hard. He had been a fool, bewitched by a pretty face. This Conchita Jones was like a cactus flower—lovely to look at, but the hand that touched it was stabbed by its daggers.

"Ragged little peon armies to the south," Tio Carmichael was saying, "are reaching for rifles. A great revolution is in the making, but guns and ammunition are difficult to smuggle across the Border. The River Guards are watchful, as are the *rurales*, and there are spies everywhere."

"The old ones and the *muchacha* are not spies," said Conchita, "I am sure. They are not cunning enough. But it is possible that their bravery will make up for their stupidity."

"Two nights ago," said Uncle Carmichael, "*contrabandistas* were ambushed at the river."

"An' ye want us to run them guns?" rumbled old Dewlap, scowling.

Carmichael Jones shrugged. "Have I said so?" He added, "Who dances must pay the fiddler."

"What does this here job pay?" demanded Wattles.

"Your freedom, as I have told you, will be your payment," said Carmichael Jones. "Of course, I cannot know how greatly you value your lives."

"Looks like ye got us where the hair is short," sighed Dewlap.

"If you succeed in smuggling this contraband into Mexico," said Tio Carmichael, his eyes holding a crafty gleam, "and safely return with the cattle, which I have bargained for, you will find me most generous, *amigos*."

"I won't work fer a cent less'n forty a month," said Wattles.

"The gringos are not in a position to bargain," the fat man reminded them.

"Mebbe so," said Dewlap, taking another look into the courtyard, where the sinister piles of earth were growing. "Mebbe so."

"By and by," said Uncle Carmichael, "a *mozo* will come with your supper. He will also give you instructions. Listen to them carefully. When the moon is down, your horses and some pack animals will be waiting. That is all. *Adios*."

Conchita smiled at the Hairpin Kid. "I like you, too," she said, and wrinkled her nose at him.

DEWLAP and Wattles examined the door and window bars, but there seemed no hope of making their escape.

"We're complete bogged," gloomed Wattles.

"Ye got us into a fine mess, ye old taran-t'lar," snarled Dewlap.

"Shet up!" said Wattles. "I wanta think."

"What with? When that jasper bashed ye on the noggin, yore brains leaked out."

"Yore head was a desert to begin with, ye wind-bellied ole mossy-horn."

"You got a couple drinks out of it," said Dewlap, almost crying; "all I got was a lummox on my skull."

Wattles stretched out on the bunk. Dewlap prodded him over and lay down beside him. Soon both were snoring peacefully—unmindful of pestiferous flies, the heat, the jail stench, or Old Man Death, leering at them from around the corner.

The Hairpin Kid, hunkered against the wall, stared resentfully at his sleeping pards. Though they were always jawing and quarreling, nothing seemed to bother them greatly. Mebbe it was because they were old, the Kid thought. He guessed things didn't matter much when winter came to a man. But he was in the spring of life; the years were just greening up ahead. Yet, here he was in a stinkin' jail—a pawn for filibusters, a marked card in a cold deck. Tonight, tomorrow, a bullet might be his lot.

The Kid got up and stood looking moodily from the barred window. Thinking about Conchita, he was. He didn't know whether he'd most enjoy slapping her or kissing her. . . .

The peons in the courtyard had quit their digging, and were haunched along the wall. The high-walled courtyard, it seemed, besides being a place of execution and burial was also used for wood storage and for wagons.

Now and then a Mexican driving a wood-laden burro drifted in. It seemed to the Kid that down the Border way there was always a big straw sombrero and a pair of cotton pants trudging along behind a shaggy burro and its enormous load of sticks.

Watching the burros, coming in with their loads, started the Kid to thinking. There was something funny here.

Shadows lengthened, and night slipped its loose cloak over Tuscarosa town. There was growing activity in the jail yard now, the Kid noticed—something vague and obscure, and not meant for the outside world to know.

Along Cimarron Street and around the Plaza

Del Sol, lights cast their mellow glow. The cantinas came to life. Somewhere a guitar strummed a plaintive melody and a singer unburdened his aching heart. . . .

Tio Carmichael's *mozo,* or man-servant, brought tortillas, jerked beef and terrible coffee to the jail. A gun was slung at his hip, and beneath his gaudy serape, the Kid glimpsed a bandoleer of cartridges. The Kid thought he looked pretty war-like for a feller who just chored around the home ranch.

The *mozo* lighted a candle in the outer office; then unlocked the cell door and waved the prisoners to the table. When he spoke, his speech was soft, but his eyes flickered at them like coals in the dark, while his right hand hovered close to his six-shooter.

Dewlap looked at him, snorted. "An' what might yore name be, my fine-feathered friend?"

"Alfredo Francisco Morales, *señor.*"

"Shall we skelp him now," growled Wattles, "or let his hair grow a leetle?"

"Le's eat first," suggested Dewlap.

While they hungrily attacked the food, Alfredo squatted by the door, sucking at a wilted cigarette. When the meal was done, the *mozo* tossed a crude map onto the table, and explained that they would cross the river below the town.

"I weel breeng the señores horses, *poco tiempo.* Please mak' no trouble." Alfredo tapped his sixgun significantly.

"Damn yore ornery buttons," said Dewlap, "we're honest t'Gawd citizens o' Texas. Yuh can't do this to us."

"When I git my pants out of this here pokey," stated Wattles, "I'm a-slopin' fer far parts."

Alfredo smiled at the old ones sadly; then reminded them that they were considered as *bandidos,* saying if they remained in Texas they would be hunted as such. It would be much healthier, he pointed out, if they crossed the Border, *muy pronto.*

In a little, another swarthy son came in. He, too, was heavily armed. After a whispered word with Alfredo, they went out.

Wattles wagged his head. "She's a-gittin' complicated. I wisht I was back at the Lazy Cross."

Dewlap poked his head cautiously out of the door, which had been left unlocked, but hastily withdrew it upon discovering a big-hatted figure, lazing against the front of the jail, a rifle cradled on his arm. "We're complete surrounded," he croaked.

The Hairpin Kid returned to the cell, and stood listening to small noises that marked some kind of preparations outside, in the jail yard.

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CARMICHAEL JONES, smoking a fat cigar, was sprawled out comfortably in a chair in the living room of the most pretentious house in shabby Tuscarosa, talking to Dolph Zeller, the deputy.

"Is everything in readiness?" asked Tio Carmichael.

"All set." Dolph Zeller grinned crookedly. "I tipped off the River Guards that there would be an attempt to smuggle guns across the river at the crossing below the town tonight."

The fat man puffed at his cigar, nodding his head slowly. "And one of my men has notified the Federalists what to expect. They will be waiting on the Mexican side."

"These hombres will probably put up a fight," said the deputy.

"That is good. It will hold the attention of the lawmen while our big pack train moves across the river above the town. The guns and ammunition will be safely on the way to Don Ignacio before the ruse is discovered—if it is discovered at all." Uncle Carmichael fairly glowed. "A man must use his brains in this game, Dolph."

Conchita swept into the room, a vision of loveliness. She gave the deputy a warming smile and looked at Tio Carmichael. "Have the arrangements been completed?"

"To the last detail." Uncle Carmichael gave Dolph Zeller a sly side glance. Conchita did not know the last detail included the worst kind of double-cross. Conchita was a straight-shooter, who believed in giving even a dog a fighting chance for his life. Her fairness irritated her uncle, at times. "Alfredo was here but a few minutes ago. He says the prisoners ate well and talked big."

"Much depends on them," said Conchita. She added, "The old ones are fools, but the *muchacho* is a nice kid."

Dolph Zeller scowled. He was in love with Conchita, but she had always held him at arm's length. It would be like her, he thought sullenly, to fall for the reckless young cowpuncher.

"If the little fool don't stop a bullet at the river crossing," snarled the deputy, "I'll gun him down the next time I meet him. A man can't pull a gun on me an' get away with it."

Conchita's dark eyes laughed, but behind their laughter blue ice formed. The Kid had said, "I like yuh!" And his blue eyes had been honest in their admiration; not calculating and lustful, as the eyes of most men when they looked at her.

Conchita's mother had been royal Spanish; her father a handsome young American ne'er-do-well—the black sheep of an aristocratic family hunting romance and adventure south of the Border. He had found both. Shorly after his marriage to the beautiful Spanish girl, he had been killed while fighting with the *Insurrectos*. A year or two later, his wife had died, some said of heartbreak, leaving a baby girl to the tender mercies of a scamp uncle, busy with the business of amassing wealth and power.

Conchita, the blood of thoroughbreds in her veins, was as heady as a Morgan colt, with a will of her own, and a fiery temper, as well.

While she did not always approve of Tio Carmichael's methods, Conchita lent her support to the polished old rascal because of her loyalty to the cause of the Revolutionists, slaving under the feudal yoke of the tycoons of the great *haciendas*.

Now, Conchita sensed that her uncle and the surly Dolph Zeller were holding some covert thing from her. Woman's intuition told her that this plotting was of a bloody nature, but what it might be she could not be sure. Her eyes darted from one to the other.

"You have not told me everything."

"We have decided to split the pack trains," Tio Carmichael said slowly. "The River Guards cannot be in two places at once. One train will carry a large number of guns and much ammunition; the other but a few of the precious Winchesters."

"But how can you be sure the River Guards will not strike at the larger train?" Conchita asked.

"The gringos will move first," Tio Carmichael said, silkily, "and will come under attack at the crossing below the town."

"But what if they succeed in escaping the attention of the River Guards?" asked the girl.

"That is impossible." Tio Carmichael made a tent of his fingers, and smiled across them at the girl. "The River Guards will be watching for them."

Conchita's eyes widened. "You mean it will be an ambush?"

Dolph Zeller grinned wickedly at the girl's look of horror. "We're playin' it safe."

"The *rurales* have been informed, also," said Tio Carmichael, smugly.

"If those three hellions run the gauntlet on this side of the river," said the deputy, "they'll come under the fire of the soldiers on the Mexican bank."

"It will be beautiful to behold," said Uncle Carmichael, chuckling.

"The gringos have committed no crime," cried Conchita, "deserving of a death sentence. Even the law of the fugitive gives a prisoner some small chance."

"Hush, Conchita *mia!* Tio knows best."

"They're so damned fond of fightin'," said the deputy, "let 'em get a bellyful."

Conchita's eyes flashed dangerously; she stamped her small slippered foot. "They were promised a job, an opportunity to buy their freedom. You gave them your word, Tio Carmichael; then betrayed them."

"It is for a cause," said the other, piously.

"And for gold and cattle," the girl retorted angrily.

"You're prettier than ever, when you get mad," said Dolph Zeller. He added, "All's fair in love and war."

Conchita flashed a look at the deputy that saw through him and ten feet behind him. "So you think all is fair in love and war?"

"Hell, yes."

"Very well," Conchita said. "I shall remember that." And the tight line of the strawberry lips flickered into a brief, mocking smile.

CHAPTER THREE

Hellions on the Loose

A HELL town, sitting astride of the Border. That was Tuscarosa, its soiled skirts a cover for illicit affairs and blackguardism.

In the trail towns that old Dewlap and Wattles had known, cowboys took the lid off with a whoop and a volley. When men were killed, they were killed openly and violently. But in Tuscarosa, the grizzly cow pokes had discovered, there were deep intrigues, with murder a baited trap for the unwary, a judgment assessed against the pilgrim caught in its jaws.

Hunkered in the jail office, the two oldsters gloomily awaited the return of Alfredo.

"Damn a town that jails a hombre, jist fer settin' his Colt afire," grumbled Dewlap disgustedly.

"This can't be Texas," said Wattles sadly.

The Hairpin Kid, watching from the windowless opening of the cell, had given up trying to solve the riddle of what was happening in the courtyard, and was staring at the horned moon, which was on the ebb, as were his spirits. Soon it would be down, and he and his two pards would be riding the owlhoot south of the Border.

And then a voice whispered from the deep shadow beside the adobe wall—a voice breathing his name. . . .

Draped with a black mantilla, Conchita had gone to the gloomy old church to pray, as was her nightly custom. In a pool of blackness at an alley mouth, Dolph Zeller had watched her, his eyes bleakly suspicious.

Dolph Zeller was a product of the Border—a gun-tough, who had himself engaged in many shady enterprises before politics had hung a deputy's badge on him. A swaggering bully, who had a liking for easy money, he had joined up with Uncle Carmichael, and so held a key to the clandestine affairs of Tuscarosa.

Because she was clean and lovely, Dolph Zeller had fallen hard for Conchita, having tired of affairs with other and more obliging ladies of the town.

Dolph Zeller's jealousy had prompted the hunch that the fiery Conchita was more than passingly interested in the Hairpin Kid, and he regretted that he had not killed the cowboy that noontime, instead of taking him prisoner.

Now he was resolved to follow the girl when she left the church, lest, possibly, she attempt to communicate with the prisoners, and warn them of the ambush at the river crossing.

In the church, head bowed, Conchita spoke with silent lips to the saints of Santa Fé. Usually she prayed for the peons and the poor in her mother's country beyond the Rio Grande. She remembered them tonight, but she also said a small prayer for the blue-eyed Hairpin Kid, who that day had said, "You're a queer one, Conchita—*but I like yuh!*" This young *vaquero,* the girl thought, was as honest as sunlight, as clean as a mountain creek.

Whether the saints in the dark and musty corners of this old church whispered to Conchita, kneeling there, or whether it was woman's intuition—who knows? Whatever it was, a small warning voice spoke within her.

Conchita crossed herself, genuflected; then pulled the mantilla tight about her, and, walking with the stoop of an old woman, let herself out of the church by a rear door, to make her way by dark back streets to the gate of the courtyard behind the jail. She spoke to the armed guard there, and was admitted.

Quickly, she went to the rear of the jail, and stood beneath the window of the cell that had been occupied by the gringos. She cupped her hands about her mouth and whispered a name.

"Hairpin! Hairpin, are you there?"

The Kid's fingers tightened on the bars. The horned moon was riding low; the time was getting short. "Who is it?" But the Hairpin Kid knew, and, in spite of his mistrust of this strange and beautiful little vixen, his heart sang in drumbeats against his lean ribs.

"Conchita."

"Whatcha want?" The Kid's voice was harsh, wary.

"You must not cross the river below the town! The River Guards are waiting; also, the *rurales.*" The girl went on breathlessly. "Circle back and ride to the crossing a mile to the west of the town."

"Yo're tryin' to trick us."

"No! I swear, before *Dios, muchacho!*"

"Yuh done me dirt when yuh quirted down my gun in front of the saloon."

"You would have been killed, had I not acted quickly." Conchita went on, her voice soft, pleading, "Can't you see, Hairpin—Tio Carmichael, who is a fox, would have the gringos act as decoys, while the guns, which are buried in this very yard, are smuggled safely across the river above the town."

The Hairpin Kid whistled softly. So this Tio Carmichael figgered to run a sandy on 'em.

The peons out here had not been digging graves at all, but were getting ready to load contraband—probably concealing it under the wood carried by the burros.

"When you have crossed the river," the girl whispered, "join this pack train, and go with them to Pancho Villa, who will be waiting in the mountains to the south. The password is—*Conchita.*"

"I won't fergit it," the Kid said with deep feeling, "or you, Conchita."

"Hark! the horses are coming. *Hasta luego*—until we meet again. . . ."

THERE was little time left, but the Hairpin Kid managed to make Dewlap and Wattles understand that Tio Carmichael had cunningly plotted the granddaddy of double-crosses. Without a doubt, Alfredo and the others were in on it, and meant to pull out before they reached the crossing below the town.

"The dam' ole hell-dodger!" growled Dewlap.

"An' he talked so sweet," said Wattles sadly. "The ole son of a pig."

Alfredo came in. "The horses await, *amigos.*"

"If it wa'n't fer the love o' Gawd in my heart, Alfredo," rumbled Dewlap, "I'd bop ye one, if it was the last act of a misspent life."

"Why, *señor,*" said Alfredo in an injured ton, "I do not understand."

"Live an' learn, ole son," said Wattles ominously.

"Where we come from," said Dewlap, "a jasper conducts hisself accordin' to the dictates of his conscience—an' his shootin' ability."

In the street outside, the three pilgrims found their wiry mustangs, geared up and ready. Their gun-belts hung from the saddle-horns; their saddleguns stood in the scabbards. Other shadowy riders were there, big-hatted figures, with carbines held across the saddles.

Dewlap and Wattles buckled on their guns, grimly content in knowing that now they had a fighting chance. The Hairpin Kid was trembling a little, as he looped his gun-belt around him, but he steadied when Dewlap said, "Ride 'em, Button."

Alfredo said, "Are the Greengos ready?"

"Podner," growled Wattles, "ye don't know the ha'f of it."

Alfredo took the lead. The other horsemen, the three Texans discovered later, for the most part, were made up of *Americanos* of border breed. They rode in close formation behind the prisoners. In this manner, the little cavalcade moved down the street toward the Plaza Del Sol.

"The pack animals are below the town," Alfredo said. "The crossing weel be mos' easy. The patrol ees up the reever."

"Yo're a liar by the clock," said Dewlap vigorously.

"*Caramba!* What ees eet you say, *amigo?*"

"*Caramba* yorese'f, yuh honyak," said Wattles.

Alfredo shrugged. Gringos were very hard to understand, at times.

This was still the shank of the evening, and the *cantinas* were filled with music and laughter. In the Jubilo, Sockem O'Brien was recounting the noonday episode to a group at the bar. "Them two ole hellions come in here an' raise up a fuss, an' did we lay 'em low. Haw!"

Carmichael Jones had come to stand on the portico of the Posada, the town's leading hotel, to observe the passing of the condemned—Tio Carmichael, *jefe, alcalade, comandante.* A big toad in a small, very muddy puddle. He wore a large, expensive sombrero, a colorful *serape,* an expansive smirk. This would teach those crazy gringos a lesson.

Dolph Zeller was there, sullen-eyed over the way Conchita had given him the slip. The night marshal, a trigger-quick hardcase named Hod Jody, had come up; also the *segundo* from Uncle Carmichael's rancho, north of town, a snake-eyed hombre of shady repute. They made a trio of very tough customers, whose guns were chevroned with memorials of dead men.

"Here they come," said Dolph Zeller.

"Don't look like much to me," sneered Hod Jody, as Dewlap, Wattles and the Hairpin Kid came into the aurora of a street lamp.

"Hell, them old hombres have got one foot in the grave a'ready," said the *segundo,* one Virg Pierce. "An' I ain't a-meanin' a bullet-dug grave neither."

"I hope they will not sell themselves cheaply," mumured Tio Carmichael. "I have gone to much trouble to provide *muy grande* entertainment."

It was where the street from the jail made junction with Cimarron and the Plaza Del Sol. The *clip-clop* of the walking horses struck at the tightening silence of the plaza like the slow drumbeat of a death-march.

OLD DEWLAP, his hoary mustache a-bristle, had craftily loosened the tie-strings that secured his coiled lariat to the saddle and and freed a little wildcat noose, entirely unnoticed by the riders behind. He let a few feet of rope pay through the honda; then let the loop drop to the ground, while he gave the coils in his hand a free run.

Because Texas men tie hard and fast, old Dewlap had slipped the tie at the horn, thus setting himself up, under the present circumstances, as a "dally" man, which meant that he could free himself of the rope when he was ready.

Alfredo, in front, offered no immediate threat; it was the horsemen close behind, their carbines at ready, who held Dewlap, Wattles and the Kid under gun. These riders were crowding up close, a bit overconfident and contemptuous of the seemingly subdued trio in front.

And then it happened. Old Dewlap loosed a wild Confederate yell, kicked in the steel, snapped a fast dally on the horn with the last few feet of rope in his gnarled hand and reined right.

The lass-rope came taut with a *ping*—and hell was unloosed.

The unseen loop, dropped by the wily old sin-twister, had snared and front-footed one of the horses behind. Horse and rider crashed down, to the accompaniment of distressful howls.

Dewlap rode a tight half circle, while the singing rope cut the legs from under two more of the riders, spilling them in a welter of dust and threshing horseflesh. The ground shook; the air vibrated with squealing ponies, shrieked curses and general pandemonium.

Alfredo spun his mount and grabbed for his six-shooter, but at that instant a noose snaked out from the expert hand of Wattles and caught a rear leg of his pony. One moment, Alfredo rode with gallantry; the next, he had been piled ignominiously.

Dewlap turned the dally loose, and cleared his old six-smoke. Immediately, Tuscarosa was was presented with a reasonable facsimile of bibulous Dodge in its rootin'-tootin' heyday.

There were high-pitched cowboy yells, and guns began to take the town apart.

A street lamp exploded, a windwsash caught a slug and glass showered down, a straw sombrero popped into the air, a tile overhang came apart at the seams and fragments rained on the sidewalk.

Dolph Zeller grabbed for his .45 and lunged forward, but a snarling bullet, *zinging* past his ear, dampened his ardor, and he jumped for the shelter of a portico pillar.

In the Jubilo, Sockem O'Brien had been saying, "It will be a cold day before them ole hell-dodgers show up in here ag'in."

At that moment, a horse and rider came through the door. Astride the tough little mustang was a grizzled figure with a bloody bandage around his head. The horseman, yelling like a Comanche, was flourishing a lead-spouting S. A. Colt.

Sockem O'Brien yelped, "Judas wept, here they come!" and hit the floor.

The customers began to vacate the premises, singly and in squalling groups, while havoc reined down. Glassware erupted, tables crashed, cards, chips and abandoned hats filled the air.

Hoarsely, old Wattles chanted, "I'm a he-wolf from Simon Crick, an' this is m'night t' haowl! *Ye-e-ow!*"

Dewlap, standing in the stirrups circled the plaza, yipping and discharging his six-shooter, as he brought to Tuscarosa a page from the book of old Dodge, the wildest, wickedest town on earth.

His spirits soared. What did it matter that the great cattle drives were done? Down the Border way, he and his two pards had found a virgin field for helling.

OLD WATTLES, having shot out the lights in the Jubilo and stampeded its denizens, hunched down on the neck of his bronc and emerged from the door like a hoary thunderbolt, leaving behind a scene of devastation horrible to contemplate. His six-gun empty but his soul a-brim with triumph, he hoorawed away to side Dewlap and the Hairpin Kid.

Hod Jody and Virg Pierce, recovering somewhat from their surprise, had clawed out their shooting irons and charged into the plaza as they attempted to wing-shoot these hooting centaurs, but, directly, they were caught in the path of a couple bolting ponies and bowled over.

Dolph Zeller blasted away, but his shots were wild, and he only succeeded in killing a *paisano,* hunting shelter across the plaza.

Alfredo groggily picked himself up and attempted to lay old Dewlap low, but the Hairpin Kid came slashing in, to knock the revolver from his hand.

Tio Carmichael was like a man stunned by a blow. Too much had happened too fast, even for his usually agile brain. *"Por Dios!"* he cried at last. "I will cut out the gringos' hearts for this!"

Conchita came to stand beside her uncle, and when she spoke, her voice was gay, like a small bell ringing. "The *muchacho* was much too young and fine to die, Tio."

Uncle Carmichael stared at her, as understanding dawned. "You have betrayed me?" he exclaimed.

"Forgive me, Tio," said Conchita. "But with your own ears you heard Deputy Zeller say that all is fair in love and war."

"You—in love?" said Uncle Carmichael contemptuously. "How is it possible? You only met this young fool today."

"You do not know a woman's heart, Tio. Strange things happen there."

"These gringos will be rounded up," said Tio Carmichael ominously, "and then it will go hard with them."

Dewlap, Wattles and the Hairpin Kid hit down a night-shrouded street that led from the plaza at a fast run, the hoofs of their horses a thinning sound against the turmoil in Tuscarosa town.

Conchita blew a kiss after them. *"Vaya con Dios,* Hairpin," she said softly—"Go with God!" . . ."

On the rutted wagon trail that sloped away to the river below Tuscarosa, Dewlap, Wattles and the Kid came on several pack horses just off the road, and jerked down their mounts.

"Quien es?" cried the startled Mexican, who had been left with the animals.

"Don't git technical," said Dewlap. "Jist ride fer yore life. Hell has bust."

Wattles waved his .45 as a further reason for sudden departure, and the swarthy one lit out at a high lope.

"Le's go!" cried Dewlap. "That wolf-pack back there is a-gointa be ridin' on our tail directly."

"We'll l'arn 'em a few tricks," growled Wattles.

They spooked the pack horses into a run, pointing them toward the river. From somewhere in the willows that fringed the bank, a voice cried, "Halt!" But already the three riders had reined around and were doubling back. Behind them there were hard, bright scratches against the gloom of the bottoms, and the angry rattle of gunfire.

They pulled off the road finally, and reined in to let their horses blow. "I ain't had so much fun," old Dewlap chuckled, "sinst the time they hung my Uncle Pewley."

"Done figgered we was gonners fer a spell," said Wattles.

"Yop," said Dewlap; " 'specially when I seen them pall-bearers diggin' graves behint the calaboose."

"Them wa'n't graves, said the Hairpin Kid. "They had guns buried out there—the contraband they were gettin' ready to smuggle acrost the river tonight."

"The hell yuh say!"

Horsemen clattered down the road from Tuscarosa.

"There's the posse," said Wattles. "Them boys is shore on the peck."

"When they find out we didn't cross the river," said Dewlap, "these parts is a-gointa be right onhealthy."

"What say we taken a leetle pasear into Mex," suggested Wattles. "I allus did want t' go to a furrin' country."

"We might join the contraband train," said the Hairpin Kid. "They're likely at the upper crossin' right now."

"It's an ijee," said Dewlap, "seein' as how we're on the dodge from here out."

"Might pick up them cattle that slobber-tongues ole wahoo was a-tellin' about," said Wattles, "an' make a dicker with somebody fer 'em."

"An' we might git our britches fogged full o' lead," said Dewlap, "if'n we git ketched rackin' 'round with a mess o' hide an' horns that ain't branded quite accordin' to Doyle."

"If we git ketched," croaked Wattles, "somebody's going to be very onhappy to us anyhow."

"Shorely. Le's go."

The two old hellions and the button rode a fast-paced circle that carried them wide of Tuscarosa, and brought them at last to a sandy ribbon of road that wound through the low hills to a river crossing some distance above the sprawled adobe town.

At intervals, they passed plodding burros loaded with firewood, which the Kid suspected was merely camouflage for hidden guns. When they had crossed the river, they came up with the main body of the crawling mule train.

The Hairpin Kid explained to the muleteer in charge that they had been sent by Tio Carmichael to help guard the contraband, and gave the password—Conchita.

"We are to go with you to Pancho Villa," said the Kid, "an' drive the cattle back to Texas. Sabe?"

"Si, Señor."

SLOWLY the caravan crawled deeper into a primitive and awesome land—into old Mexico.

It was a troubled country, a country of bandits and freebooters and guerrillas. "A place of no quarter," the chief muleteer said, "and no surrender." This, then, was the land of which Conchita Jones had spoken—the country of the landless and the lawless.

To Dewlap and Wattles, it was the same raw west they had known, but in a different dress. No weary mile, going up the trail to Dodge, to Ogallala, to Miles City, that death had not ridden with them, stirrup to stirrup. Here, as on the plains of Kansas and Wyoming, a man was either durable, or dead.

The two oldsters and the Kid had occasional glimpses of oxen and creaking two-wheeled carts, and crude wagons, drawn by double teams of burros, hitched three abreast. The Mexican oxen, they noticed, carried their yokes on their horns, instead of around their necks.

Now and then, men with scarlet serapes rode into camp with messages for the contraband train; then were gone, as eerily as they came.

Once *rurales* attacked a dawn camp, but Dewlap, Wattles and the Kid, forted up in the rocks, drove them off.

"Now the greengos are *bandidos,"* said the chief muleteer, "and are part of us." He gave them a snag-toothed grin. "If you are *captura* by the *soldados* you weel be shot *mucho* dead."

"Mebbe we're a-gittin' into suthin'," said Wattles lugubriously.

"We're on the owlhoot," said Dewlap, "from hell to Texas."

And then one day a rider on a great black horse appeared. The Hairpin Kid saw a youth of about his own age, with an enormous sombrero pushed back on a great shock of reddish brown hair, massive shoulders and eyes hot as muzzle flame. The impact of the stranger was terrific, and when he spoke his words cracked.

This, the three Texans learned, was Pancho Villa—a boy, a *muchacho,* in years, but a man in hard-earned and bloody wisdom. Pancho Villa, the leader, who was to hold the destiny of thousands in the palm of his hand before that roaring decade was done.

Pancho Villa examined the grease-smeared Winchesters and checked the boxes of ammunition, and the fierceness of his face relaxed into a brief, boyish grin.

"One day these weapons will aid in the victory for the peons, who fight for *mi jefe,* Don Ignacio," he cried. "*Viva libertad!*"

"*Viva* Villa!" cried the Mexicans.

Pancho looked at the gringos. "You are employed by Tio Carmichael, eh?"

"Reckon that's the general ijee, podner," said Dewlap.

"*Bueno!* Fat cattle from the great *haciendas* pay for the rifles. A herd is ready in a nearby *barranca.*"

"Rustled stuff, I reckon," said Dewlap.

"Stolen," translated the muleteer.

Pancho Villa shrugged. "What does it matter?"

"Now we're runnin' wet cattle," said Dewlap.

"The way we got our necks stuck out," grumbled Wattles, "somebody's liable to pop a noose over 'em"

"An' what do we git out of it?" said Dewlap.

"You have said you were employed by Tio Carmichael," Villa reminded him. His fierce eyes hit hard at the Texas men with sudden suspicion. "You will start *pronto,* eh?"

The Kid guessed the owners of these cattle probably were looking for them.

"Deliverin' this herd to that oombray in Tuscarosa is liable to be a leetle complicated," rumbled Wattles.

"*Por que?*"

The Hairpin Kid, feeling that nothing was to be gained by beating about the bush, told what had happened, including Tio Carmichael's attempted double-cross and their escape.

Pancho Villa threw back his head and laughed uproariously. He was an expert with a reata and could appreciate this neat bit of skullduggery. However, he added that a bargain was a bargain, and said the delivery of the herd was up to the gringos.

"I think it is Tio Carmichael who should beware at the time of settlement," said Villa. He went on to say darkly that Tio Carmichael was a fat fox, who looked into his pocket book and not his heart when he dealt with the *insurrectos*—a man with an eye against God.

Pancho Villa told them then that *vaqueros* would assist with the cattle until they were trail-broken, and that a rider who knew the country and how best to elude a *rurales* was to accompany them to the Rincón del Sanjón, a rendezvous a short distance below the Rio Grande. Here Tio Camichael's *Segundo* would meet the herd and make a tally, after which the gringos must run the cattle across

the river. Tio Carmichael's vaqueros then would take over.

"What the *Americanos* do after the tally has been made," said Villa, "is their affair; not mine. The fire Tio Carmichael has built in his house warms only himself."

Dewlap turned thoughtful, as he scratched his leathery old neck. "Shorely."

"We ain't never lost a trail herd yit," said Wattles.

"What-all onfolds in Texas directly," said old Dewlap dreamily, "you'd be alarmed at, podner."

CHAPTER FOUR

Gun-Pards Last Call

TIO CARMICHAEL was surprised and not a little disturbed when a big-hatted and dusty son of old Mexico brought him word that the three gringos had made contact with Pancho Villa, and at this very moment were trailing two hundred and fifty head of fat steers toward the Rincón del Sanjón.

"They arrive *mañana, señor*—at sundown. They have told me to inform you, and convey their compliments. The gringos wish me to say they will come for a settlement *poco tiempo*—in a little while."

"Caramba!" cried Tio Carmichael. "I never thought or wished to hear of those sons of *diablo* again. I cannot understand it. Either they are bigger fools than I believe, or there is mischief afoot." He dismissed the Mexican with a wave of his hand.

Conchita entered the room. "Did you call, Tio?"

"I did not," said Tio Carmichael, "and please get out of my sight. By *Todos Santos,* only for you, my love, there would be three graves for weeds to grow on, instead of three gringo buzzards breathing down my neck."

"Why, Tio, you are upset," said Conchita. "Have you bad news?"

"Quien sabe? However, I fear there is a pretty kettle of fish, and fish in any form smells. Please tell Alfredo to send Dolph Zeller here at once."

The deputy, after a long and fruitless search, had given up as a bad job his attempt to track down the fugitives. The sign he had cut below the town had lead circuitously to the upstream crossing and so into Mexico, where it had fouled out. But Zeller was convinced that the three Texans had doubled back and made good their escape up the trail.

The killing of the *paisano* by a wild shot in the plaza that night, he had charged against them. However, he had sent out no general alarm, fearing that if they were arrested and told their story to honest lawmen the whole thing might backfire in his face. He had been mixed up in too many shady Border deals around Tuscarosa to take any chances at this stage of the game.

This was his own private war, and would only be settled to his satisfaction when the Hairpin Kid and the other old hellions had been gunned down.

When Tio Carmichael told of receiving word that the cattle would arrive at the rincón the next day, and that the three crazy gringos seemed hell-bent on playing out their hand, Dolph Zeller's flat, brutish face, recovering from its first show of surprise, turned darkly cunning.

"If that Mexican was tellin' the truth," snarled Zeller, "we'll soon put an end to this damned foolishness."

"We must use caution," warned Tio Carmichael. "Sometimes my fingers play so sweetly and the music comes out so sour." He grimaced. "This is one of those times. I suspect these rash ones are hoping to collect a fat fee for their services."

"It will be easy to ambush them at the rincón," suggested the deputy.

"As easy, perhaps," sneered Tio Carmichael, "as the ambush we planned at the river crossing."

"Hell, I'll take a posse an' go get 'em," said Zeller.

"No, fool!" cried Tio Carmichael. "Not into Mexico. It might stir up International complications, and prove most embarrassing. I have a better plan. Alfredo has gone to saddle my horse. I wil ride out to my rancho and instruct Virg Pierce, my *segundo,* to take all available riders and proceed to the rincón tonight, and there await the arrival of these men with the cattle. When they discover the ambush, the gringos will, without doubt, make haste to flee across the river to American soil. As they are already fugitives, the rest I leave to you, Dolph."

Dolph Zeller's eyes gleamed wickedly. "We'll fog 'em into the ground."

"See that they do not escape," warned the fat man. "One day they might boast of their deeds in Tuscarosa, and the tongue is a flame that is dangerous to affairs of darkness. The Border Patrol would very much like to get evidence against Uncle Carmichael."

"Them hombres are as good as buzzard bait right now," promised Dolph Zeller.

The next morning, the deputy swore in half a dozen Border gun-toughs and rode out of Tuscarosa to take up a position along the river directly north of the Rincón del Sanjón and not far from Tio Carmichael's ranch. . . .

On the benches above the rincon, Virg Pierce and his men watched for tell-tale dust smoking up in the south, which would signal the coming of the cattle.

The brassy sun wheeled across the sky and

rode down to the western desert rim. Long shadows reached out across the flats and the hills cloaked themselves with purple. Still there was no sign of the herd.

His patience frayed thin, Virg Pierce cursed savagely, and ordered two of his men to scout the trail to the south. Some time later the riders returned on steaming horses, to report that close to dark they had cut the tracks of cattle and horsemen at a point where the herd had turned west in a rocky arroyo. Spoor indicated that the cattle had passed that way hours before.

"Them damned old hellions never figgered to drive to the rincon!" cried Pierce. "They're goin' around an' will line that stuff out for the river upstream, sure as hell. No good tryin' to run the trail in the dark, so you hombres split up an' work both banks to the west. Moon will be up after a spell an' yuh might sight 'em."

The *segundo* then crossed the Rio Grande and rode to the place where Dolph Zeller was waiting.

When he learned what had happened, the deputy was beside himself with fury. "They won't git far!" he raged. "Come daylight, we'll be able to run them tracks right up their rumps, damn their souls!"

He ordered his companions to comb the breaks along the north bank, in the meantime; then headed for Tuscarosa with Virg Pierce.

TUSCAROSA town was a-sprinkle with lights. The air was soft, and peacefulness was there. In the cantinas, voices were gay, and there was laughter and lilting melody.

Straw sombreros, cotton pants and *mantillas* paraded in the plaza, and there were *cigarrillos,* winking in the companionable gloom like fireflies. There were *señors* and *señoritas,* and men of the Border and their ladies. And there was one more—the pilgrim called Death.

Conchita Jones had been to light a candle before the Virgin in the ancient church—a candle for the *muchacho* with the honest blue eyes. She lingered now under the banyan tree at the sidewalk's edge to watch the yellow moon, blooming up over the edge of Texas.

A horseman, coming down Cimarron Street, drew rein, back in the deeper shadows. Conchita's glance went that way, a vague something whispering within—something she could not define. She felt, somehow, that eyes were watching her.

Tio Carmichael came along the sidewalk—a jolly little fat man, who each night waddled off to the Cantina de Jubilo to have his fill of wine and exchange a bit of banter with the dancing girls, and dream of his youth.

"A wonderful night, Tio," said Conchita.

"It is, indeed," said Tio Carmichael, and chuckled deep in his belly. "Soon now Dolph Zeller will bring me word that the troublesome gringos are very dead, somewhere out yonder."

"You are a wicked old man," said Conchita, "and I despise you."

"It will soon pass," said Tio Carmichael, "this foolish love you have for the young *Americano.* There are many more fish in the sea, Conchita *mia."*

Conchita held her nose. "All feesh steenk," she said mockingly.

Came the sound of walking horses up Cimarron Street, and a cracked, high-pitched voice sang:

With my knees in th' saddle an' my seat in th' sky,
I'll quit punchin' cattle in th' sweet by an' by-y.

Tio Carmichael, his fat belly swathed in a red sash and a flat-crowned hat set precisely on his round head, had stopped for a word with a friend outside of the Cantina de Jubilo. A small frown creased his brows. It struck him that something was vaguely familiar about that voice, and in Tuscarosa town, riders did not sing trail songs.

Entering the *cantina,* Tio Carmichael was greeted by a jovial Sockem O'Brien, who bobbed his head at the new back-bar mirror, which had been shipped out from El Paso and only installed that very day.

"All fixed up ag'in, Tio," said Mr. O'Brien cheerfully.

"I see," said the fat man, viewing himself in the mirror and chuckling blandly.

"An' the next old hellion that comes bustin' in here an' raisin' up hell," said Sockem, "I'm goin' to shoot right in the belly."

Busy attending to the wants of his customers, Mr. O'Brien was not immediately aware of the new arrivals, and only made the discovery when he happened to glance at Tio Carmichael.

Uncle Carmichael, his mouth a-sag, his eyes as big as two eggs frying in a skillet, was staring into the back-bar mirror, his face the color of a batch of dough.

Sockem O'Brien froze. Bellied up to the bar, one on either side of Uncle Carmichael, were the horse-faced old hellions—Dewlap and Wattles.

Mantled with trail dust, their jaws covered with gray stubble, they had the look of men long in the saddle. Weariness had gaunted them, but their eyes were bright and hard.

"Por Dios!" gasped Tio Carmichael, certain that his eyes were deceiving him. "What is this?"

"We come t' settle up," said Dewlap.

"Yop," said Wattles; "We're a-quittin'."

Tio Carmichael's brain just didn't seem

to track. Something was wrong. Groping for words, he finally stammered, "You—you have not delivered the cattle."

"The hell we ain't," said Dewlap.

"They are at the rincon?"

"Didn't 'low we'd go stickin' our snoots into anothed bushwhack, did ye, yuh pot-bellied ole badger?" demanded old Wattles.

"We crossed 'em upstream apiece," stated Dewlap.

"Where did you leave them?" said Tio Carmichael, partly regaining his composure.

"About a mile west of the ranch layout a hombre says belonged to ole man Carmichael. Talked like he knowed yuh."

"Who was this man?"

"Now that's right keerless," said Dewlap, "but we never did git a-holt of his complete handle. Claimed he was ridin' fer the Border Patrol."

TIO CARMICHAEL turned to jelly. "The Border Patrol!" Little beads of perspiration popped from his brow.

"Seems like," said Wattles pleasantly. "Nice feller, but a mite nosey."

"So we spilled a sneak loop," said Dewlap, "like we done fer neighbor Alfredo, front-footed his cayuse an' drug."

"This *orejana's* podner was projectin' 'round in this here mess o' hides an' horns," Wattles elucidated, "which when they spooked he was busy as a stump-tailed bull in fly time."

"We jist let 'em go to hell," said Dewlap, 'an' come to town." His old eyes preyed on the bottles on the back bar. "Me, I been a-hankerin' fer to sample that here teekeeley pizen even sinst I witness how she bushwhack that ole wampus cat," jerking his head at Wattles.

"Shorely," said Wattles, his eyes a-thirst. "An' make mine the same."

Few in the cantina seemed aware that something out of the ordinary was happening. Mr. O'Brien's bartenders continued to wait on trade, while at the back a little group of bespangled musicians opened up with a lively tune.

"*Tequila* ain't for you saloon-bustin' ole hellions," said Sockem O'Brien through his teeth. "I got something' better for your belly." His right hand began to slide stealthily toward the edge of the bar.

"Mister," said a voice at the end of the bar, "yuh reach under that counter, an' I'll blast yuh wide open!" The Hairpin Kid's bony thumb eared the hammer of his six-gun full back.

Tio Carmichael swallowed the drink in the glass before him, his brain working fast. It was a tight spot, but he had been in many tight spots, and had always managed to wriggle clear. These *pelados,* now—they must have a price, certainly, or they would not have returned to Tuscarosa.

The drink seemed to have steadied him. He said abruptly, "How much money do you want?"

"Money!" hooted Dewlap. "Hell, ye ain't a-talkin' to us, yuh yelleh-livered polecat."

"Not none," said Wattles, drawing himself up pridefully. "We got our pants throwed in the pokey, an' yuh offered to turn us loose if we done a job fer ye. An' we done 'er, by crickey!"

"We're pore but proud," said Dewlap with dignity. He eyed Uncle Carmichael coldly. "An' we allus pay our debts."

"Yuh tried to run a sandy on us," said Wattles with a preoccupied look. "That was bad."

"Damn near ruint us," appended Dewlap, "right in our prime."

Tio Carmichael managed an oily smirk, a mask for the thing building within. His glance struck briefly at the back-bar mirror. Two men had come into the saloon, to stand just inside of the door—Alfredo and Hod Jody, Tuscarosa's trigger-handy night marshal.

"Let us be reasonable about this," said Tio Carmichael suavely. "You have done me a great favor, and I, as I have told you, am most generous. I have then, shall we say, a present for you. Please accept it, with my compliments."

Tio Carmichael's right hand slid beneath his scarlet sash—and came out, gripping a wicked little double-barreled Derringer. . . .

THE Hairpin Kid fired across the bar top. Blending with the crash of the Colt was the tight bark of the .41 caliber Derringer.

Tio Carmichael, *alcalde* of hell-tough Tuscarosa town, wily rascal of the Border, took the snarling .45 slug squarely in the immaculate bosom of his white shirt, and was dead when he hit the floor. The bullet from the little hide-out gun drilled a small, harmless hole in the bar front.

Dewlap and Wattles flung around, their gnarled, rope-burned hands hitting fast at holstered guns as they squared away for battle with the two figures standing just inside of the door. Long ago, in the roaring trail towns, the two old hellions had learned to watch the back-bar mirror when trouble was on the make.

The music had quit, and the scream of a dancing girl knifed into that awful instant of stillness which held the stunned Cantina de Jubilo before flaming six-shooters started their roaring avalanche.

On Cimarron Street, there was the rapid run of hoofs, a sound that was lost against the boil of excited voices and gunfire. Dolph

Zeller and Virg Pierce jerked down their sweated horses in front of the saloon, and sat for a moment watching the swirl of excitement on the sidewalk, thinking this was but another ordinary gun-brawl.

Zeller saw Conchita Jones then, framed against the yellow glow of a window, her face pale, tense. "This ain't no place for you, woman," the deputy called roughly. "Vamoose."

Conchita gave her shapely head a defiant toss. "This *is* my affair," she answered him, and swung her lissom body past a hitch-rail and between two ponies, nervously a-dance.

Dolph Zeller stared, frowned, as he suddenly had an awareness of some savage tide running—something deeper than the madness of carousing men. He yelled at a bystander, wanting the answer to it all.

"Caramba!" cried this man. "The three greengos are back again."

Dolph Zeller cursed. The fool was crazy; these helling sons of Texas could not possibly have reached Tuscarosa, even had they dared show themselves. However, he jerked out his six-gun, yelled something at Virg Pierce and lunged for the sidewalk. . . .

Dewlap said, "I'll take th' greaser!" Catquick, he was, as he spraddled around, the hammer-piece of his Colt gun hauled back.

Wattles' bright eyes looked out from under beetling brows, taking measure of the blocky man with the marshal's star. Hod Jody, his head sucked down between his shoulders, was set for the kill, but he had thought to shoot this grizzled old buzzard in the back, not realizing that the back-bar mirror had betrayed his entrance.

The marshal's weasel eyes popped at the suddenness with which the battle was joined; his rat-trap mouth sagged. He managed one too-hurried shot, and then a screeching slug almost tore his right arm from its socket.

Alfredo had required a moment to orient himself before he pitched a bullet at the Hairpin Kid, which laid its cold caress on the other's cheek and went on to tear at the bottle wares on the back bar. Hot lead then from Dewlap's jolting gun hammered into the faithful *mozo,* and he journeyed on to serve Tio Carmichael on another Border, far away.

Sockem O'Brien grabbed for the gun under the counter. Set in a crouch, he made his bid, but the Hairpin Kid slapped a slug into a bottle on the bar, not a foot from the moon-faced proprietor. Blinded by liquor and flying glass, Sockem O'Brien called it a day.

THEY had settled their score, these three Texas men, and it was time to go. The Kid was the first to reach that yellow path of light, spread like a rug on the sidewalk before the *cantina,* with Dewlap and Wattles behind.

From a blurred somewhere in the blue night a voice cried sharply. *"Hairpin! Hairpin, Look out!"*

The Kid whirled, and saw the dim shape of Dolph Zeller standing there. Fury at this betrayal rode through the deputy and set him afire with savagery. He had thought to have the pleasure of shooting down this hated young puncher after taunting him, cursing him, while Virg Pierce, there in the saddle at the hitch-rail, knocked over those two old sin-twisters who were his partners.

Zeller had no time now to speak the hatred in him; only a precious second to start his six-gun talking. There was the hot breath of muzzle-flame, not four full paces from the Kid. A bullet tore at his loose-hung vest, but then he was whipping around squarely to face his antagonist.

The lessons old Dewlap and Wattles had taught the Kid were like water stored against a drought. He fought the wild impulse to fire while he was off balance, waiting out that endless split second and only driving a bullet at Zeller when he knew he could not miss.

Zeller loosed his second shot, but it struck the planking in front of him, for the reason that the impact of the slug in his belly had jackknifed him forward. He fell slowly, and then lay without movement.

Conchita had snatched a carbine from a saddle scabbard, and now drove a bullet at Virg Pierce, whose six-shooter already was blasting. The *segundo's* pony pitched him from the saddle, as it whirled and bolted.

Conchita picked up the trailing bridle-reins of the horses belonging to Dewlap, Wattles and the Hairpin Kid, and was waiting at the edge of the plaza when the adventure-hunting oldsters and the button came to join her.

"The prayers I have said," the girl told the Kid, "have been answered." Her strong fingers caught his hand and held it tight.

The Kid stared at her. "I think Uncle Carmichael is dead," he said. "He had it comin', but I'm sorry it had to work out this way."

"Tio will be happy where he has gone, and I will pray for his soul."

"Gee, yo're a queer one, Conchita," the Kid said, "but—hell, I'm goin' to kiss yuh!"

Such a kiss! The Hairpin Kid remembered the crushing warmth of those strawberry lips over the long miles they rode.

"You will come this way again, *muchacho mio?"* Conchita said huskily.

"Some day," the Kid said.

"Ca'f love!" snorted old Dewlap.

"Slobbers is ketchin'," growled Wattles. "Le's git out of here."

"If Hairpin had not unlocked the door to my heart," said Conchita Jones, "you'd be under a coffin lid now, pappy."

THE END

Bullet-Miracle at the

By L. Ernenwein

"He who hates," the prison padre told Melody Mike Burdette, "harms himself a hundred times more than he does his enemy...." But Melody Mike had to play one last grim trigger threnody, a deadly Colt-tune for which Jim Shannon would pay in blood—or return Melody to a hell-on-earth!

CHAPTER ONE

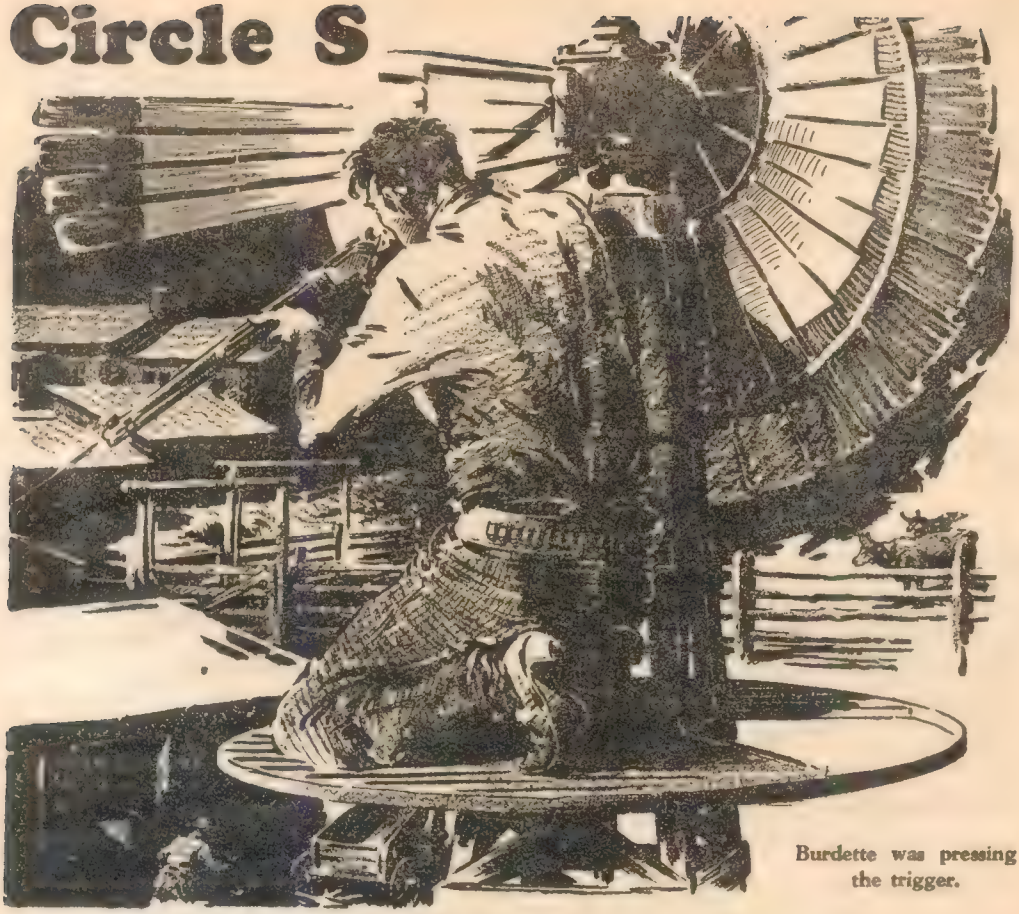
"He Who Hates..."

THIS day's sun poured its heat into Yuma Prison with unceasing intensity. It put a shimmering glitter on the Yard's powdery dust and turned the Snake Den into a stifling, foul-stenched oven. Melody Mike Burdette was thinking about that oven now as he sat in his cell braiding a horsehair hackamore. He had helped tote bread and water to five prisoners in the Snake Den at dawn and he guessed there wouldn't be five men tonight. One would be a corpse, for Kid Casco was dying out there this afternoon. . . .

The convict in Number Six cell called, "How about a little tune, Melody—help us to forget the heat?"

Burdette's perspiring, angular face retained its bitter frown as he reached for the tiny Mira music box atop the shelf beside his bunk. It was not an old face, despite the prison pallor which had turned his tanned cheeks to a chalky gray, and had made his smoke-blue eyes seem darker than they were; it was a lean, high-boned face that needed only a smile to retrieve its lost youthfulness.

Circle S



Burdette was pressing the trigger.

Stirring Novel of an Outcast's Come-back

But Melody Mike seldom smiled.

Methodically, as a man doing a chore he'd done countless times before, Burdette wound up the little music box. This was the one possession they'd permitted him to keep. Its tinkling music was like a slender strand, stretching back to better days and pleasanter ways, but Melody Mike scarcely heard it now. He was remembering Kid Casco's frantic babbling—the frenzied, fearsome stare he'd seen in the Kid's death-haunted eyes at dawn. And he was remembering how Yard Captain Drake had scoffed at his suggestion that the Kid he moved. . . .

"Hell no!" Big Dutch Drake had exclaimed. "The dirty devil don't deserve to live. Let him die!"

Melody Mike didn't hate the captain. He couldn't. There was no room in him for additional resentment of any kind. A man could hold only so much hatred; even when he discarded every other emotion there was a limit to the hatred one man could hold. That limit, for Melody Mike, had been reached over a year ago at San Simone—the day Jim Shannon spoke the words which brought a verdict of guilty against Mike Burdette and Kid Casco.

Shannon's damning testimony was etched so sharply in Burdette's mind that he could recite it, word for word. . . .

"Buck Antrim was alive when I found him," Shannon had declared. "Buck said two riders ambushed him, that he recognized Kid Casco and believed the other was Mike Burdette. Then Buck died."

That's what Jim Shannon had told the jury. The lying son hadn't mentioned how he'd once tried to buy Mike's little MB ranch which had a year-around spring Shannon needed, nor that they were both courting Lindabelle Brent. The damned hypocrite had even tried to act like he was sorry to testify against a neighbor. . . .

And the prison chaplain said you shouldn't hate a man like that!

Remembering all the times Padre Paul had visited him, and how useless those visits were, Mike's lips twisted into a cynical smile. He was a slick talker, the Padre. He could quote fancy phrases out of books by the hour, like the one he'd sprung yesterday:

He who hates, harms himself a hundred times;

Yet the one he hates harmed him but once.

What the hell did the chaplain know about hate? A gospel-slinger wasn't caged up, night after night. Padre Paul didn't sweat out the inching hours when cell walls crowded close and sleep wouldn't come. He didn't know the tricks a man's mind played on him when he got to thinking how things used to be—riding fast with the wind in your face, smelling horse sweat and leather and the fine fragrance of greasewood after rain or seeing your cattle graze in stirrup-high grass along the draws and hearing mesquite beans rattle in a Fall breeze. Or taking a sashay into town of a Saturday night to see a sorrel-haired girl named Lindabelle. . . .

Melody Mike cursed and wiped his sweating face on a sleeve already sopped with sweat. Just because he didn't rant and rave and cuss the guards like Kid Casco did, the Padre thought he was getting somewhere with all his high-sounding talk, and the warden called him a model prisoner. Well, they'd find out different, by grab. And damned soon!

Burdette glanced at the row of chalk marks on the wall of his cell and checked his count of them for the third time this day. Fourteen marks, and one for today would make this the fifteenth—the day Santa Fé Smith had chosen for the break. Smith's smuggled note had been brief—so brief it made a compact ball no larger than a .45 calibre slug. But it had been specific: *Saturday the fifteenth. West wall, ten paces south of sentry tower.*

Burdette smiled thinly, as near to real smiling as he'd come in months. Santa Fé Smith had finished a term for bank robbery three weeks ago and he'd promised to help Melody Mike make a getaway. "I got a mint of money cached from my last bank job," Smith had said. "Plenty to bribe a guard and fix it so's we can high-tail it across the Border where I got friends."

With the nerveless patience of a thoroughly disciplined man, Burdette kept his fingers to their task of fashioning black and white horsehair into tight, strong braids. This hackamore wouldn't be much use on a wall-climbing job, but it would be long enough for the chore he had planned for it. When his ears picked up the ponderous tromp of Big Dutch Drake coming along the cell block, Burdette gave no indication of more than casual interest. A man learns to mask his emotions in prison; he learns to hide his hope as a tiger hides its young. . . .

The big yard captain came to the cell door and unlocked it. He said, "All right, chump. Go talk to the warden. But it won't do you no good."

"Mebbe not," Burdette admitted, and laid the hackamore aside. "But I've got to make a try. The Kid was riding for me when we were arrested. It's the least I can do for him."

"Be careful you don't try too damned hard," Drake warned. "Don't talk yourself out of your trusty rating, and spoil our checker games. This heat ain't helpin' old Stoneheart's disposition, none at all."

MELODY MIKE was thinking about that as he crossed the sun-hammered quadrangle to the warden's office. There wasn't one chance in a hundred he could talk Warden Stone into allowing Kid Casco to leave the punishment hole. The warden was a hard man; he had to be to run this hard-case corral. The Kid woudn't be the first rebel to die in the Snake Den; nor would he be the last. Some prisoners could control their resentment and nourish it against the day of reckoning. They could bridle their passion and wait out the plodding parade of days. But some men couldn't choke down the spleen of their hatred—and Kid Casco was one of these.

A rasping, inarticulate screech pulled Burdette's attention toward the Snake Den. There was nothing familiar in that frantic cry which held the toneless wail of all prison yammering, yet Melody Mike knew the Kid's fever-blistered lips had uttered it. And he remembered how hard he'd tried to convince the Kid that rebellion against guards and regulations would only make a tough game tougher.

But the Kid had declared: "I'll battle the stinkin' sons from here to hell!"

And so he had. . . .

Burdette closed his ears to that yonder yelling. He entered the administration building and stood patiently while a guard ran practiced fingers over his tall frame from neckline to ankles.

"Hotter'n the hubs o' hell," the guard complained.

"Yeah," Burdette agreed, and walked down a long corridor toward the warden's office.

This, he reflected, was the first foolish move he'd made in all the thirteen months he'd been here. And he was making it on the very day he'd so desperately awaited; was risking the trusty rating his long patience had won—all the precious privileges that meant a chance

to escape. It occurred to him abruptly that Kid Casco wasn't even a friend; just a saddle-tramp who'd been on his payroll for five days. For a moment, then, he was tempted to turn back, but the Kid's yammering still echoed in his ears. So he went on into the office.

Warden Stone was dipping a bandanna handkerchief in a basin of water on his desk. He glanced up at Burdette and muttered gruffly: "So you think Kid Casco can't stand any more punishment?"

"He's a sick man," Burdette explained, seeking some sign of tolerance in Stone's granite-gray eyes and finding none. "The Kid will die unless he's moved right away."

"So?" the warden mused, and wringing out the bandanna, draped it over his bald, perspiring head.

Then he said irritably, "You cons are all alike. Give you a little liberty, and you start asking favors. Well, get this straight—I don't change prison routine for anybody. And I don't like trusties running in here just because a dirty rat like Casco does a little yelling."

Melody Mike shrugged. "I knew that," he admitted, turning back to the door. "But I had to ask, regardless."

"How'd you ever get tangled up with such a loco galoot in the first place?" Stone inquired. "You aren't the same breed at all."

"I needed a rider and hired the first one who came along," Burdette explained. "My little outfit was wedged between Jim Shannon's Circle S and Luke Tannenbaum's big Spade spread. They had a range feud on and were using my land for their fighting, so I hired Casco to help me string some fence. Soon after that a Circle S cowboy was dry-gulched and we got framed into jail."

"Framed!" Stone scoffed disgustedly. "Every con in here sings the same damn song!"

Then, just before Burdette went out, the warden said: "I'm going to have Casco moved into the hospital. But not on your account, nor his either. I've got a hunch he might confess before he dies."

"Thanks," Mike said. "Thanks, anyway."

When he got back to the cell block Big Dutch asked sneeringly: "You satisfied now?"

Burdette nodded, and remembering what he had to do tonight, said, "You're a smart man, Dutch—but you're not smart enough to beat me a game of checkers."

That sly brag got under Drake's skin, as Mike had hoped it would. Big Dutch liked to listen to the Mira's tinkling tunes and so he sometimes took Burdette over to his quarters behind the Commissary of an evening. Lately they'd got to playing checkers for an hour or two. . . .

"I'll trim you tonight if it takes all night!" Drake declared.

That sent a thrust of high-riding optimism through Burdette. He had figured out an alternative plan in case Drake didn't feel sociable; but escape would be a lot simpler this way. And a lot safer.

Presently, when Drake had tromped off down the corridor, Mike resumed work on the hackamore. A close observer would have wondered why he was dismantling the headstall so that it became a five-foot length of braided horsehair rope. And why he was surreptitiously poking the rope inside his shirt until it made a triple coil around his body.

But, there was no close observer. . . .

CHAPTER TWO

The Makings of a Miracle

THE corridor guard made his nine o'clock round of the cells and, seeing Burdette's gate open, swore irritably at this lack of strict discipline and at the extra steps it forced him to take. Finished with his inspection he crossed the quadrangle to Captain Drake's quarters where lamplight glowed and gentle music drifted from the open doorway.

"One prisoner missing," the guard announced, ignoring Burdette's presence at the checker table.

Big Dutch reluctantly shifted his glance from the game, saying: "All right, all right—he's in my custody ain't he?" Then he handed the guard a cigar and speaking in a more gracious tone, said, "Forget about him, Gus. We're going to play checkers until it cools off enough to sleep."

Melody Mike's lean face showed no sign of the secret satisfaction Drake's words stirred in him. But he laughed a little, deep inside; for the corridor guard had been the one weak link in his strategy. Had the guard reported here after each round of the cells he'd have discovered the getaway within an hour of its occurrence. Now, thanks to Drake's suggestion, the fellow wouldn't bother to report here again tonight!

"Your move," Big Dutch muttered and turned to wind the music box for another trio of tunes.

"Yeah—my move," Burdette said softly. But he wasn't looking at the checkerboard. He was watching Drake—calculating the time it would take Big Dutch to wind the Mira; measuring the distance he had to cover before he could slug Drake into swift, silent submission.

Easing cautiously from his chair, Burdette tensed his muscles for the coordinated moves he had to make. And because Drake was still winding the music box, Melody hastily

checked those moves in his mind. *I've got to hit him just below the left ear when he turns his head . . . got to hit him hard enough so he won't yell while I truss him with the horsehair rope . . . then gag him with his own shirt.*

And at this exact instant, as Drake started to turn around, Burdette heard Padre Paul say: "Good evening, men."

For a tumultuous, tortured moment Burdette considered going through with it—considered knocking Drake senseless, then turning his fists upon Padre Paul. He'd never been a religious man, this Melody Mike; but the very thought of striking a priest made him shrink. Cursing inwardly, he slumped back into his chair and was vaguely aware of Big Dutch asking: "What can I do for you, Father?"

"Just came from the hospital," Padre informed Drake. "Warden Stone asked me to have you report there at once."

Drake grimmaced. "A woman's work is never done," he complained, and glancing at the checkerboard, added: "It'll only take about four more moves to tie you up, Mike. Be damn sure those men are in the same position when I get back."

He went out then and Padre Paul asked: "Do you remember that quotation about the futility of hatred, son?"

Burdette nodded. He seemed to be considering the checkerboard in deep concentration. But he wasn't thinking about the game at all. He was hoping Padre Paul would go—hoping harder than he'd ever hoped in his life. Almost praying. For if the priest departed now there'd still be a chance to reach the west wall before moonrise—a chance for freedom and revenge!

"You'd do well to ponder those words," Padre Paul counseled quietly. "They contain the makings of a miracle."

Miracle hell! Burdette reflected impatiently. He'd work his own damn miracle if this priest would take his smiling face and wagging tongue to hell out of here. . . .

Padre Paul stepped over to him, patted his shoulder in benevolent fashion and said, "He who hates harms himself a hundred times, yet the one he hates harmed him but once—*if at all.*"

Then he went outside, his sandals making scarcely any sound.

Melody Mike loosed a gusty sigh. All his muscles tightened until his entire body was like a coiled spring cocked for release. This was it. This was the miracle he had waited for so long, the miracle he'd made himself.

Reaching hastily for the Mira he wound it tight, wanting its music to cover his departure. He'd have to leave the music box, but that wasn't important. Nothing was important, now, except getting out of here—quick.

The gentle notes of *Sweet Alice Ben Bolt* tinkled behind him as he crossed the dark quadrangle on swift, silent feet. . . .

IT WASN'T far from the rear of the Commissary to the west wall; not more than a hundred yards. Yet it seemed like a mile to Melody Mike, the longest mile he'd ever traveled. Warily, like a lobo scenting trouble, he glanced toward the main guard tower which adjoined the entrance gate. There was a Gatling gun up there that could spray hot lead all across the enclosure. Remembering how that chattering weapon had riddled an escaping convict a month ago, Burdette's stomach muscles crawled. The cell-crazed con had been cut in half, so that he made two bundles when they put him in the dead basket. . . .

That gruesome recollection was like a taunting companion as Melody Mike moved cautiously across the yard. There was no moon yet—no break in the sultry, quilted darkness between him and the wall which rose like a bank of clotted shadows ahead of him. Because he'd charted this desperate journey so many times in his mind, he went unerringly toward the sentry tower and presently glimpsed its vague shape outlined against the lesser darkness of the sky. He saw a cigarette's pin point of light glow cherry-red up there, and guessed the guard had heard him—the guard Santa Fe Smith had bribed.

When he was within arm's reach of the wall, Melody Mike turned left, and forcing himself to walk, counted off the paces. "One, two, three," he whispered. The guard's cigarette made a brief downward arc ahead of him, its lighted tip bursting into a little shower of sparks as it struck the ground. "Three—four—five—six."

Burdette wondered how long Big Dutch would be detained at the hospital. He might be on his way back to the Commissary right now; might already be there, seeing a vacant chair at the checker table. . . .

"Seven—eight—*nine.*"

Sweat's salty sting was in Mike's eyes as he took the final step and felt for a rope. His ears keened the windless air for sound of alarm and the thumping of his heart was like a hammer pounding inside him, faster and faster, louder and louder.

The rope—where in hell was it?

Melody Mike held both arms extended on either side and took five more steps ahead. Perhaps Smith had miscalculated, or the throw had gone wide of its mark. Perhaps the whiskey-loving little outlaw had got drunk tonight and forgotten to come here at all. He might be lying drunk in some cantina right now, or be entertaining a dusky-haired senorita in the *congal* district. . . .

Burdette cursed, eyes probing, hands reaching. It would be moonrise within another few minutes. He tried to stomp down the thought of what that Gatling gun would do to an escaping convict in the moonlight. It occurred to him that he wouldn't be out here now, circling like a rat in a death-baited cage, if Jim Shannon hadn't told his scheming lies to a jury.

"Damn him," Mike croaked hoarsely. "Damn his dirty stinking soul to hell!"

He turned, moved closer to the wall, walked ten paces north. His questing hands itched with anticipation, their palms wet with sweat. He had to find the rope now. In another five minutes it would be too late, for the guard in the main tower would see him. And the Gatling gun would chatter out its chant of death.

And then, with a dismal sense of futility slogging through him, he found it—a heavy hemp rope with a pot hook dangling at its end!

An ecstacy of exultation raced through Melody Mike Burdette. It brought a bouyancy to his body so that he felt young again—young and strong and a trifle drunk. He tugged on the rope three times in swift succession, which was the signal agreed upon. When two answering tugs came back he began climbing hastily, hand over hand, panting and sweating, cursing his slowness yet wanting to laugh and shout and sing. Here was a miracle for that swivel-jawed chaplain to talk about—a miracle made by hate!

Reaching the top of the wall, Melody Mike took time to haul up the pot hook and fasten it. For Santa Fé Smith had warned him against jumping. "It'll only take a minute longer and you won't risk breaking a leg."

MELODY MIKE went down the rope so fast that the hemp blistered his hands. And almost at once Santa Fé was slapping him on the back, saying excitedly: "By God, you just made it—moon's coming up now."

Then Santa Fé scurried down the bluff and Mike followed him. The reedy little outlaw ran across the greasewood-blotched cemetery and halted beside two horses. "Take your pick," he invited. "They're both damn' good ponies."

Whereupon Melody Mike grinned joyously and declared: "Best looking broncs I ever saw—bar none!"

Presently, as they galloped through the willows along the river, Mike thought he heard a bell ringing back there on the bluff. But because he was once more riding fast with the wind in his face, that remote sound didn't trouble him. Let the bell ring. Let old Stoneheart send out a searching party and be damned to him!

Afterward, when they halted to give the horses a breather, Santa Fé said: "There's a full outfit of clothes in that bundle behind your saddle, including boots—and a six-gun for ballast."

Melody Mike got down and stripped off the hated stripes he'd worn so long. Until this moment he'd looked like a convict and thought like a convict. But now he felt free. Shedding prison garb was like discarding a foul, clinging burden. He said huskily: "You sure remembered everything, Sante Fé," and recalling how he'd imagined Smith might be lying drunk or consorting with some senorita, he felt ashamed. "Don't know how I'll ever pay off."

"You paid off with all them tunes you played for me so's I could forget the heat," Smith said, and squirted tobacco juice between his bronc's ears. "Too bad you had to leave the Mira. It made to'able sweet music."

"Yeah," Burdette agreed, "but I'm playing a different kind of music from now on—a trigger tune for Jim Shannon."

"Who's he?" Smith inquired, and when Mike told him, the little outlaw exclaimed: "Hell—you can't go there, Mike! They'd grab you sure!"

A mirthless smile creased Burdette's moon-

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lit face. "Don't reckon they will—not before I've settled with Shannon," he said flatly.

"But it'd be just a matter of time," Smith insisted. "It'd mean more prison—or a hang-noose, sure as hell. Why don't you forgit about Shannon and hole up with me across the border? We'll live like a couple o' kings down there, Mike. *Mucho tequila,* smiling senoritas—and no damn lawdogs lookin' over your shoulder. Come on, kid—let's high-tail south!"

Burdette shook his head. And when Smith offered to accompany him to San Simone, Melody Mike said, "No, Santa Fé. It's my tune, and I'll play it alone. Besides, if you head for the border old Stoneheart's gang might think it was me—and take your trail instead of mine."

"They might, at that," Smith admitted. "They'd never guess you was loco enough to go east with the border this close."

Finally, when Smith understood that further talk was useless, he shook hands, said, "Luck, Kid—you'll sure as hell need it," and rode southward, soon merging with mesquite's dense shadows.

Whereupon Melody Mike turned his bronc into the river, splashed through the shallows for a mile and then headed east, toward San Simone—toward his little ranch, and a sorrel-haired girl, and the man he hated. The man he had to kill. . .

CHAPTER THREE

"Who in Hell are You?"

WARILY, urgently, with a soaring sense of freedom in him, Mike Burdette rode eastward, putting Telegraph Pass and the towering barricade of the Gilas behind him; Swiveler's Ranch and Oatman Flat and Signal Butte—mile after dusty mile behind him. Sand and saguaro, greasewood and mesquite, mud-rimmed water holes and dry washes. It was great to smell again the aromatic blend of pine needles and damp earth at a mountain spring, the vague scent of wood smoke from a line-rider's camp, horse sweat and saddle leather and trail dust—all the good and familiar odors he'd missed in prison. Long hours without halting, until forage was found for his horse; then brief rests while the hobbled bronc filled its belly and Burdette ate sparingly of the frugal provender in his saddlebags. . . .

About noon of the first day, Melody Mike had discovered a distant dust plume behind him—had glimpsed it again at sundown, and again the next morning. He could easily have arranged an ambush for his pursuer; twice he'd waited above brush-tangled arroyos, allowing the rider to come within three miles of him. But each time the thought of sneak slaughter had sickened Melody Mike, and so he'd ridden on, cursing himself for being a Gentle Annie.

"I should chop that galoot down the same as he'll chop me when he gets the chance," Burdette told himself.

But he didn't try an ambush and now, near sundown of the fifth day, the sign of pursuit still trailed him, some fifteen miles back—a tiny puff of dust with a single black dot beneath it. "One man," Mike reflected, wondering about this lone rider who so stubbornly followed him. Was it Old Stoneheart, whose eagerness to capture a convict had caused him to outride his companions? Or Big Dutch, spurred on by the scourging lash of a warden's rage, or some bounty-hunter who'd failed to be fooled by Santa Fe Smith's border-bound tracks?

These were the questions Melody Mike was asking himself as he neared Spanish Well waterhole and saw six range broncs rush off into the brush.

"I could sure use one of those jugheads," he mused and contemplated the chances of roping a fresh mount. But the trail-weary roan he was riding didn't have run enough left to get within roping distance of those spooky range broncs, so Mike shrugged off the idea. Not far to go now; if the roan could keep him ahead of that oncoming rider for another twelve hours, he'd be in San Simone Basin. . . .

Burdette dismounted at the hoof-pocked rim of the water hole and drank alongside the roan. Then, as he waited for his horse to finish its leisurely drinking, he noticed that the animal's left rear shoe was missing. When he examined the others he found them loose, and that discovery gave him an inspired idea—a scheme that might throw off pursuit, at least temporarily.

Leading the roan out into the shallow water hole, Melody Mike tugged the loosest of the shoes free, then, using it for a tool, pried the other two off and dropped the three shoes into hockdeep mud. Then he rode out of the water where the six spooked broncs had left plenty of fresh tracks, and followed them southward.

"That'll give a trail tagger something to think about," Mike muttered, seeing how well his mount's hoof prints merged with the scrambled patterns of unshod tracks, and later, when he had traversed a broad, boulder-strewn mesa, he rode a wide arc that ended with him heading northeast—toward the west slope of the San Simones.

It was full dark now and there'd be no moon until after midnight, which suited Burdette's purpose perfectly. Even if that yonder rider should puzzle out the pattern of tracks,

he'd have to quit his damn trailing until dawn. And by that time Melody Mike would be crossing his own range on the way to Shannon's Circle S—would be almost within shooting distance of the man he'd hated so long and so savagely!

Riding by instinct and checking his course with the high twinkle of stars he'd watched on a hundred nights like this from his own front stoop, Burdette came finally to the stage-road's vague strip of wheelchurned dust. This he followed to the crest of Renegade Ridge, then turning off the road, made camp on the east rim.

Methodically, as he'd done each night, Burdette cooked a frugal supper and then quickly smothered his small fire. Afterward he went out to the rimrock and sat staring off into the night-cloaked emptiness of San Simone Basin. Except for far-off pinpoints of lamplight there was nothing to see, yet an urgent nostalgia nagged at him. Below, and beyond, was his country; the land where he'd built a home and had taken a pride in building. He was abruptly impatient for moonrise, so that he could see this San Simone Basin he'd dreamed about so long— all the familiar landmarks and well-remembered places. . . .

He wondered how the range feud between Shannon and Luke Tannenbaum had come out; if it was finally ended, or if the two outfits were still fighting. Tannenbaum had been a newcomer to the Basin and Mike had seen him only two or three times on Saturday nights in town. One of those times he'd offered to buy MB and Mike had laughed at him. "It's not for sale," he'd told Tannenbaum. "It's my home."

Lindabelle Brent had been with him that night, attending a dance at the school house; she'd smiled and said, "You think a lot of your home, don't you Mike?"

Home. The word had a peculiar sound to it, now. An unreal sound, like the remote, lilting laughter that had occasionally drifted over the prison walls of an evening at Yuma.

The dismal thought came to Melody Mike that he would never live in his little 'dobe house again; that killing Jim Shannon would only mean more bounty hunters on his trail. And when the prison reward posters reached this part of the country, there'd be little chance of his survival. It occurred to him, then, that escaping from Yuma hadn't made him free. Hell, though, he could never be free anywhere until his hate was spent—until Jim Shannon paid for all those inching, sweat-slogged days and suffocating nights in prison. And then it would be too late for freedom.

Remembering Kid Casco's tortured screeching, Mike wondered if the Kid had died. That was another thing Shannon must settle for.

"I'll shoot the lying son on sight," Burdette muttered, and all his nostalgic yearning vanished in a sudden rush of renewed hatred.

MELODY MIKE didn't intend to sleep. He intended to stay awake until moonrise, then ride leisurely into San Simone Basin by a roundabout route that would keep him clear of the stage road. But long hours of tedious riding on meagre rations had taken its toll and so, finally, he slipped into the deep, dreamless slumber of sheer physical exhaustion.

It was full daylight when he opened his eyes. For a moment, before his sleep-fogged senses became fully alert, he didn't know what had awakened him. Then he turned his head and saw Luke Tannenbaum standing ten feet away, with a gun in his hand. . . .

He was a big man, this Tannenbaum; bigger than Captain Drake. An ingrained toughness was stamped into his florid, coarse-featured face and the hard brightness of his black eyes matched the metallic shine of the gun he held.

"What you skulkin'around up here for?" he demanded curtly.

It didn't occur to Melody Mike that this man hadn't recognized him. "That shouldn't be hard to guess," he answered, and stood up. "I'm on my way to Circle S, if it's any of your business."

"You'll never git there," Tannenbaum declared, his thumb drawing the gun's hammer back with a sinister click. "You're as near to San Simone Basin right now as you'll ever come."

Those words, and the plain purpose in Tannenbaum's black eyes, astonished Mike Burdette. Why in the hell should this big rider be holding a gun on him? What reason could Spade's boss have for keeping him away from Jim Shannon?

"If you want to make a grab for your gun do it now," Tannenbaum suggested, scowling. "Otherwise I'll kill you cold-turkey."

Burdette knew it instantly that he meant it. Tannenbaum's unblinking eyes, his compressed lips, even the sibilant tone of his voice showed he was set for swift slaughter. And there was no way to stop him. For even though Mike's holstered gun was within inches of his right hand, he'd never live to draw it. Tannenbaum was teetering on the thin edge of firing right now, just waiting for an excuse to press the trigger!

All this in a fleeting interval while the talons of Burdette's mind snatched for some straw of survival; while black apprehension clawed him like a clutching hand and fear turned him sick inside. Not fear of death, for Melody Mike had died a thousand deaths

in the caged hell above the Colorado's stinking water. Death was familiar to a man in prison, like a loathsome companion held in contempt. It was fear of losing something infinitely more precious to him than life that gripped him—the fear of losing his chance to kill Jim Shannon.

The prospect of failure now, when he was so close to his goal, loosed a tumult of rage in Melody Mike. It made him snarl: "What the hell is Jim Shannon's death to you? Why should you want to save that stinking liar?"

His furious demand registered instantly on Luke Tannenbaum. Swift puzzlement showed in the big man's eyes as he asked: "Ain't you wearin' a deputy marshal's badge?"

Melody Mike starred at Tannenbaum in bug-eyed amazement. *Marshal's badge?* Why should this beefy-faced killer think he'd be wearing a thing like that? Then abruptly it dawned on Mike that Tannenbaum hadn't recognized him—that the big rider thought he was someone else, possibly some deputy marshal on the prowl. . . .

Whereupon Melody Mike Burdette laughed for the first time in over a year. Gusty, hysterical laughter that sounded crazy to his ears; that gushed from his lips like a flood flowing from broken barriers.

Luke Tannenbaum finally demanded: "What's so hellish funny?"

The gun was still aimed at Burdette's belt buckle and Tannenbaum's thick thumb held its hammer at full cock, but now Melody Mike ignored the weapon. "So you thought I was a badge-toter?" he asked derisively.

"Yeah—and I still ain't got no reason to think different. I happen to know Shannon sent for outside help—that's why me and my crew been watchin' this rim for a week."

Melody Mike pointed to his beard-bristled face, said, "Look close, Luke. Don't I look familiar to you?"

The big rider peered at him, shook his head. "Ain't never set eyes on you before," he muttered. "If you ain't a law-dog, then who in hell are you?"

"Burdette," Melody Mike announced. "Recognize me now?"

Tannenbaum shook his head again. "Mike Burdette was a youngish galoot," he said. "Youngish and round-faced and weighed twenty five pounds more'n you'll ever weigh. Also, he happens to be in Yuma."

For a moment then Mike Melody had the queer feeling that this was some sort of nightmare—that it wasn't real at all. How could Luke Tannenbaum fail to recognize him even after being told who he was? Of course he'd lost a lot of weight, but surely thirteen months in prison hadn't changed him that much. Or had they?

He said, "Well, I am Burdette. I broke out of Yuma so I could come back here and kill Shannon for the dirty lie that sent Kid Casco and me to jail."

Mention of Kid Casco seemed to convince Tannenbaum. He lowered his gun and asked quickly: "Did the Kid break out too?"

"No. He was dying the last time I saw him. Probably dead by now."

Then Mike asked, "Are you going to stake me to a breakfast before I go gunning for Shannon?"

Tannenbaum grinned and holstered his gun. "Yeah," he said. "I'm gonna do better than that—a whole lot better."

"Such as—? murmured Melody Mike.

"Such as thinkin' up a scheme," Tannenbaum said slyly, "to dodge them gunhawks he's got guardin' his place—so you can ride right up to Shannon's front door!"

A mirthless smile twisted Melody Mike's lips. "Then let's get started," he said eagerly.

Just before they left Renegade Ridge, Mike gave his back-trail a questing appraisal and felt a surge of savage anticipation. No sign of close pursuit behind him, and no barriers ahead. . . .

Tannenbaum's promise was like a chant, like a hymn of hate ringing in his ears: *"So you can ride right up to Shannon's front door!"*

CHAPTER FOUR

Gunhawk's Goal

MIKE BURDETTE rode away from Spade with a bounteous breakfast under his belt and a deputy sheriff's badge in his pocket. A disreputable old cook had prepared the breakfast and Tannenbaum had produced the badge from a dusty shelf in the bunkhouse.

"One of my men used to be a deputy up in Colorado," he explained. "When you meet up with them Circle S riders just flash this badge—without giving 'em a chance to read what it says. They'll figger you're the marshal Shannon sent for."

"Not if they recognize me," Mike stated cautiously.

"They won't. Nobody would recognize you now, with them whiskers on your shrunk-up face. You've changed kid, in more ways than one. Hell, you don't even talk the same no more. You look six years older'n Satan, and twice as tough."

Except for one hard-faced night rider asleep in the bunkhouse, Spade's crew was out on the range, but there'd been plenty of signs to show that Luke Tannenbaum was running a warrior outfit. Upwards of twenty broncs were being held in the horse trap, ready for instant use; extra guns, stacked cases of ammunition, ramrods and oily rags

littered the bunkhouse, and brand new gun gear graced the greasy flour-sack apron of the cantankerous cook.

"I've got Circle S just about whittled down to size," Tannenbaum had bragged. "Shannon ain't got more'n five, six riders left. Some of them must be wounded, because Doc Brent made a hurry call there yesterday—him and his fancy-faced daughter. And they ain't left yet.

The news that Lindabelle Brent was at Circle S stirred a welter of mixed emotions in Melody Mike. He'd half expected to hear she was married to Shannon, and had steeled himself against that possibility. You couldn't expect a girl to stay loyal to a caged-up convict; even a sweet-voiced girl who'd promised to look after a little ranch while its owner served a ten-year sentence. She had written him once, soon after he reached Yuma, asking him not to hate Jim Shannon—because "Jim only told what he had to tell as an honest man."

Honest man hell, Mike had scoffed. Not answering her letter he had put Lindabelle out of his mind, forcing himself to forget the soft scent of her sorrel hair and the glowing warmth of her brown eyes. He had regimented all his thoughts and hopes into one single emotion—hate. And so it was now, as he rode northward with noon's sun on his shoulders. There was nothing in San Simone Basin for him except revenge—and perhaps a chance for escape to the border. He hadn't expected to survive this vengeance journey until Luke Tannenbaum had told him about the raid planned for tonight. Now there might be a slim chance for a desperate, posse-dodging convict to make a getaway. Or so Mike thought. But he hadn't noticed the sly wink Spade's cold-eyed boss had given the cook, nor heard Tannenbaum's sibilant words when he rode out of the yard: "There goes our scapegoat, Cookie—the galoot who'll be blamed for our raid tonight!"

Steadily, without hurry and without hesitation, Melody Mike rode across Spade's broad sprawl of brush-blotched range. Contemplating this land with a cowman's eye for graze he saw that it was overstocked and understood why Tannenbaum wanted Circle S grass. He noted the poor condition of numerous slat-ribbed steers wearing Spade brands, and once, near the tumbled hills that separated his own range from Tannenbaum's, Mike saw an MB cow with an unbranded calf. That sight roused a sharp, queerly urgent emotion in him. Instictively he reached for his rope, wanting to catch that calf, and earmark it. And in this moment, while his fingers felt for a rope that wasn't there, Mike Burdette was once more the proud young cowman he'd been a year ago—the tune-loving rancher who carried a Mira music box in his pocket, the one they'd called Melody Mike. . .

But the moment passed, swiftly, irrevocably; and with it went the last frayed strand of nostalgic yearning. Mike saw several MB cows with unbranded calves during the next two hours while he crossed his old range. He even glimpsed a 'dobe house looking small and forlorn and far away where it nestled under the tawny-leafed branches of a giant cottonwood. His house. But he didn't halt the roan, nor change its course. He just took that lingering look, then rode on—toward Circle S.

And his smoke-blue eyes were bleak as barren rimrock. . . .

THE Circle S wasn't a big outfit. Less than half the size of Spade. Its L-shaped ranch house was smaller, its corrals less commodious and there were fewer outbuildings than at Spade. But in one particular Circle S was strong: situated on the flat surface of a gently rising swell of land, it afforded an unobstructed view for five miles in all directions. For this reason its small crew could defend Circle S indefinitely against the onsloughts of a much greater force.

Melody Mike was thinking about that now as he started up the long, bald slope. Jim Shannon had picked a peculiar place to build his home, perching it up there without protection from wind and weather. But it had proved a valuable choice in this range war with Tannenbaum. Without so defensible a location Circle S would probably have been burned out of existence months ago, considering the size and calibre of Spade's crew. Luke Tannenbaum was a killer; Mike had understood that up on Renegade Ridge and again this morning when Spade's boss had outlined his scheme for a wipe-out raid. And it was reasonable to believe that Tannenbaum's hired hands would be killers, little less rapacious and unscrupulous than their master.

When he was within three miles of the ranch, Burdette saw two men working ahead of him with a wagon. They were unloading what looked to be mesquite limbs south of the yard. There were other mounds of piled brush behind them, spaced in such a way that they made a half circle around the ranch. For a time, as he jogged forward, Melody Mike couldn't comprehend those mounds. Then, as his eyes detected a gray patch of wood ash close by the nearest brush pile, he understood that they were the makings of flare fires for revealing the approach of raiding riders at night!

The two men on the wagon paid him no heed, although he felt sure they'd sighted him when he first started up the slope. But a third man was riding slowly toward him, close

enough now so that Mike tallied him as being Pop Dulaine, a saddle-warped oldster with a drooping white mustache and the brogue of the Emerald Isle in his voice.

This, Burdette realized, was the first test of Tannenbaum's slick scheme. For Pop Dulaine had known him for years. Spade's boss had sworn no one would recognize him. Well, the answer to that was building up right now as Dulaine peered at him from across the short distance that separated them. If Pop recognized him now. . . .

For a tense moment Melody Mike regretted falling for Tannenbaum's plan, which hinged entirely on lack of recognition; told himself it would've been better to take his chances on reaching Shannon at night, as he'd originally intended. Pop's age-faded eyes were probing, as if he sought the key to a puzzling problem. Then he asked: "What's yore business here?"

Even then Melody Mike had no way of telling if Dulaine knew him. He said, "I'm looking for Circle S—and Jim Shannon."

He held his breath, guessing that Dulaine might remember his voice. And he felt a huge relief when the old rider asked: "Would ye be packin' some credentials, mister—a badge, mebbe?"

Whereupon Melody Mike reached into his pants pocket, brought out the deputy sheriff's shield and palmed it's sun-glinted surface for brief, casual inspection.

Dulaine grinned, said, "Ye be welcome as summer rains. Come on up to the house and rest yore saddle."

MELODY MIKE slipped the badge back into his pocket with a sigh and accompanied Pop into the yard. To a casual observer he was a trail-weary rider, relaxed into taciturn silence and bearing slight interest in his surroundings. But Mike Burdette wasn't weary. And he wasn't relaxed. Every muscle of his body was cocked, all his senses coiled to a clarity of perception that exaggerated every sight and sound so that the creak of his saddle was loud in his ears when he dismounted and the swift flight of a lizard across the yard seemed like slow-motion dawdling.

"Jim is inside," Dulaine said, leading the way.

An almost uncontrollable surge of sadonic laughter welled up in Mike Burdette. Here was the goal he had dreamed about so long—the goal he had ridden so far to reach. The miracle his hate had spawned and nourished to maturity. And he had ridden right up to it in broad daylight, just like Luke Tannenbaum had promised. *Right up to Shannon's front door!*

Melody Mike followed Dulaine across the wide veranda, gun-hand hovering close to holster. No matter now if he was recognized. If Shannon tallied him it would spoil Tannenbaum's scheme of easy conquest tonight, perhaps; but it wouldn't alter the important part of this deal at all—the trigger tune payoff for four hundred days and nights of caged-up hell in Yuma!

Burdette stepped into the large living room, heard Dulaine announce: "Here's the depitty marshal from Tucson," and caught his breath.

For there, standing less than ten feet in front of him, was Lindabelle Brent. And she was staring at him as if seeing a ghost. . . .

She knows me! Burdette guessed. Yet he couldn't be sure for her oval face held a composed gravity revealing neither surprise nor excitement.

"He showed me his law badge," Dulaine declared, plainly puzzled by Lindabelle's silence.

She said, "So?" in a restrained voice. Her eyes considered Burdette's whisker-shagged face for a moment longer and she murmured: "Won't you sit down?"

Then she turned to Dulaine and said, "Slim is wanting to see you about something at the blacksmith shop."

Dulaine tromped outside, his goose-necked spurs jingling musically as he crossed the veranda. For a queerly suspended interval, while Mike Burdette and Lindabelle Brent looked at each other, there was no sound in the Circle S parlor—until she finally asked: "Why did you come here, Mike?"

That question banished Burdette's fleeting indecision; it brought him abruptly back to the hell of his hate—to the purpose which had prodded him across all the dusty miles. No chance now to make his play according to Luke Tannenbaum's slick scheme. Lindabelle had recognized him instantly; and even though she hadn't exposed his lawman masquerade to Pop Dulaine, she'd reveal it to Shannon. . . .

He glanced at the closed door just beyond her and asked flatly: "Is Jim Shannon in there?"

She nodded.

Whereupon Melody Mike started toward the door, stepping softly, like a stalking mountain cat—like a lean muscle-tensed puma, closing for the kill.

CHAPTER FIVE

"Git That Galoot!"

LINDABELLE backed hastily to the door, as if to block Burdette's passage. She was a tall and supple girl graced with a womanly charm that made her even more lovely than the mind-mirrored pictures which had tormented him in prison.

"You can't go in there," she said in a sudden, warning voice.

A sardonic smile quirked Melody Mike's lips and his voice was coldly mocking when he muttered: "I broke out of Yuma for this—so don't get in my way, Lindy."

He was close to her now, so close that the scent of her hair was like a familiar perfume. Her brown eyes held a startled, frightened look that he'd never seen in them before. "Mike—you mustn't," she objected, holding her hands so that their small, smooth palms were against his dust-peppered shirt. And when he would've forced her aside she exclaimed: "Jim is badly wounded—he's bed ridden!"

The shock of that struck Melody Mike Burdette with an impact that held him speechless and unmoving, so thoroughly amazed that he scarcely breathed. Shannon wounded! Shannon bedridden—unable to defend himself!

"Dad is in there watching through the crisis," Lindabelle explained softly. "He says Jim has a fifty-fifty chance."

A fifty-fifty chance. Well, was a hell of a lot more than Shannon would've had otherwise, Burdette reflected bitterly. For even had the draws been exactly matched and both guns fired at the same instant, Burdette told himself that he would have killed Jim Shannon. Even with a bullet in his own hide he would've lived long enough to pay off. That much he'd been sure of, not caring about survival. But now, with Lindabelle's astonishing report ringing in his ears, Melody Mike wasn't sure of anything.

In this moment of monstrous surprise and frustration he heard Pop Dulaine call: "Strange rider comin' yonderly. I'm agoin' out to meet him."

Burdette turned swiftly to a front window, peered out—and uttered a sighing curse. The oncoming rider was too far away for identification, but he sat his horse in the clumsy, forward-tilted fashion of the man who'd been trailing him for five days. By the bulky shape he made in the saddle Mike guessed instantly that it was Big Dutch Drake. Big Dutch, come to corral a convict!

Melody Mike started for the doorway. There was still a chance to run—a chance to duck and dodge toward the Border. It would soon be dusk and he could change horses at Spades, as Tannenbaum had suggested.

Then he remembered what was going to happen here at dusk. . . .

Whirling in stride he faced Lindabelle who still stood before the door, silently watching him. "You've got to leave here—before sundown," he declared. "You and your dad both!"

"But we can't do that," she announced.

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"We'll have to take turns watching Jim all night—keeping him alive.

"To hell with Shannon!" Burdette exclaimed inmpatiently. "Let the dirty liar die; it's what he deserves. All the watching in the world won't save him after sundown. You've got to get out, Lindy, before Tannenbaum's bunch get here!"

And when she made no reply, he demanded: "Don't you understand?"

Instead of answering, Lindabelle asked: "Is that rider coming after you, Mike?"

He nodded, whereupon she hurried over to him and plucked his sweat-stained sleeve and said urgently, pleadingly: "Wait for him, Mike. Let him take you back to Yuma. We're still trying to get you free and we will—if you'll just be patient."

"We?" Burdette asked, thoroughly puzzled. "Who's we?"

"Jim and I. We've never stopped trying to convince the Governor that you're innocent."

For the second time this day Mike Burdette stood gripped in utter amazement. Jim Shannon trying to get him free? Jim Shannon, who'd lied him into prison! It didn't make sense. . . .

"Jim thought you were guilty when he testified. But later, well—I convince him that you couldn't kill in cold blood, nor be an accomplice to such a killing."

Even then Burdette couldn't shed his hate; couldn't contrive a balance between what she was saying and the belief that Jim Shannon had deliberately lied him into prison. That lie was the important thing. The thing that couldn't be erased. All the rest of it was sham on Shannon's part—just a clever attempt to attract Lindabelle's affection. And it had worked. Mike could tell that by the way she'd stood in front of Shannon's door, guarding it with her body. . .

"Please, Mike—believe me," Lindabelle pleaded, her slender fingers gripping his arm. "Go back to Yuma and wait for a pardon. Please!"

HER voice held a hint of hysteria, but Melody Mike didn't hear it. All he heard was the remote, increasing tromp of two horses coming up the slope. If he didn't run right now there'd be no chance; yet if he ran Lindabelle might die, for she wouldn't leave Jim Shannon. She would stay and die with him in the bloody shambles of Tannenbaum's raid!

Torn between the urge to flee and the need to protect this sorrel-haired girl—this girl who loved Jim Shannon enough to die for him—Melody Mike cursed. He tried to tell himself that the impending raid was none of his affair, yet the dismal knowledge that his return had contributed to Tannenbaum's lust for quick conquest was like a load on his shoulders. A load he couldn't discard. . . .

"I'll stay," he muttered, his voice carrying a full weight of futility and frustration. "Mebbe two more guns will make a difference."

Which was when Doc Brent opened the door and called, "Lindy—come in here a minute."

The glad smile faded swiftly from the girl's face and her eyes held a worried expression as she turned away, but her voice was warm with appreciation when she said, "I'm proud of you, Mike. Proud!"

Melody Mike shrugged, and hearing horses come into the yard, walked out to the veranda. This, he thought cynically, was a hell of a way to be captured. Big Dutch would be surprised, seeing him empty-handed. And he'd be more surprised when he heard the proposition Mike was going to make—or try to make. Maybe Dutch wouldn't go for it; but it was sundown now, and Drake might have to fight whether he wanted to or not. . . .

And then, as he stepped through the doorway, Melody Mike stopped stiff-legged. For the man out there with Dulaine wasn't Big Dutch Drake. It was Padre Paul!

"Am I in time?" the chaplain asked, sliding from saddle.

Burdette peered at the priest in bug-eyed astonishment. "In time for what?"

"To save you from your hate—to keep you from killing an innocent man!"

Burdette nodded dumbly, not understanding this at all.

"Thank God!" Padre Paul exclaimed wiping perspiration from his sun-burned face which was lined and haggard with fatigue.

"You should've waited for the miracle I mentioned," he declared. "Kid Casco's dying confession cleared you entirely. He admitted killing Buck Antrim and said that his secret employer, Luke Tannenbaum, was with him when he did it."

Secret employer. . . . Luke Tannenbaum!

Those words were like four flashes of revealing lightning to Melody Mike Burdette. They explained everything. Tannenbaum had used Kid Casco for a tool to implicate MB in the feud with Shannon. . . .

Padre Paul placed a benevolent hand on Mike's shoulder, said: "Shannon was telling the truth when he testified. Antrim mistook Tannenbaum for you, perhaps because the Kid was on your payroll."

Then the old chaplain added softly, "He who hates harms himself a hundred times, yet the one he hates harmed him but once—*if at all.* Do you understand those words now, son?"

Melody Mike nodded, feeling a queer emptiness; a purged and peaceful emptiness, as if some toxic poison long endured had suddenly

drained out of him. His hate, he understood then, was gone; completely banished because a dying killer had confessed.

"Yes, Father," Mike said with more reverance than he'd ever used in all his life. "I understand."

And at this exact instant, as dusk settled on the yard, he heard a remote rumor of running horses. Whereupon he shouted to Pop Dulaine: "Get those brush fires lighted quick! Spade is coming—they're coming right now!"

BURDETTE'S warning brought a flurry of action. Three men rushed out of the kitchen, another came from the corral—all racing across the dusk-veiled yard at varying angles. But there was no confusion. This moment, Mike guessed, had long been anticipated. . . .

Pop Dulaine, who had ducked into the house, hurried out with a rifle and a belt of cartridges, said: "The brush fires will be blazin' *pronto*!"

The old foreman canted his head in a listening attitude, keening the air for sound of oncoming riders. Melody Mike listened also, heard hoof-pound to the north and south, east and west. Spade raiders were coming from all directions, just as Tannenbaum had promised. "We'll hit Circle S at suppertime," Spade's boss had said this morning. "If you can hold three-four of Shannon's men in the kitchen we'll bust that outfit so quick it'll look like a tornado struck it!"

Burdette cursed softly, realizing how close he'd come to being a party to this intended massacre. And knowing how monstrously outnumbered Shannon's small crew would be, he shivered a little. He touched Padre Paul's arm, said: "You'd best get into the house, before the slugs start flying, Father."

"Very well," the chaplain agreed, and then he added thoughtfully: "In times of stress look to the Lord for survival. Look up, son—look at that platform on the windmill. What does it remind you of?"

Melody Mike looked, and thought instantly: *The Gatlin gun tower at Yuma.* There'd be no protection for a guard up there, save height and darkness; and no Gatlin. But it would be a perfect perch for a gunhawk with a Winchester. . . .

Mike turned quickly to Pop Dulaine. "Lend me that rifle and ammunition," he said, grinning wryly. "I'm going up where I can see this whole show!"

The brush fires were bursting into flame as Melody Mike ran across the yard. He heard Pop Dulaine shout orders to the returning Circle S men and as he scrambled up the flimsy ladder, heard Lindabelle call urgently: "Where's Mike? Where is Mike Burdette?"

Melody Mike wondered why she'd be so interested in his whereabouts at a time like this, with Jim Shannon dying and Luke Tannenbaum's slug-slammers riding in for the kill. He was still wondering when he reached the platform and peering at the brush fires, caught a vague glimpse of riders charging up to the flame-lit yard. They made a sinister, shadow-casting sight, those blaze-illumined raiders; a blood-chilling sight. And there were at least fifteen of them!

Even as Burdette crouched and cocked the Winchester, he saw muzzle flare boom from those oncoming guns—heard their crackling explosions blast above the rumbling thunder of hoofbeats.

Wherupon Mike aimed, and fired, and missing his first target, cursed his lack of accuracy. Unless those kill-crazy raiders were stopped short of the house there'd be no stopping them at all, for they'd rush the place and overwhelm it by brute force of numbers. And Lindabelle would die down there with the man she loved—with Jim Shannon, who was unable to defend her.

So thinking, Melody Mike cursed again, and targeting another wild-riding raider, saw him slide from saddle as if roped from behind. And in this same moment, as savage satisfaction swept through him, Melody Mike heard Tannenbaum yell: "Git that galoot on the windmill!"

CHAPTER SIX

Showdown at Circle Six

IGNORING the wicked shine of close-flying slugs, Melody Mike continued firing until the rifle's hammer clicked on a spent shell. And because at least four of his bullets had found targets, he felt a swift surge of hope as he plucked fresh shells from the cartridge belt. Maybe there was a chance to repulse this raid. Spade riders were swerving away from the house. Some had already taken cover behind the blacksmith shop, while another converging group galloped to the wagon shed. Four riders were fading into the deep shadow of the bunkhouse.

This rifle roost was too much for even Luke Tannenbaum's killer courage. Spade's boss bellowed curses at his men, but he kept to cover. Melody Mike grinned at sound of Tannenbaum's rage-prodded voice. Luke had expected to find at least part of the Circle S crew all propped for slaughter in the kitchen; instead he'd found an extra gun pouring lead from the high darkness. . . .

Hurriedly levering a load into the rifle's barrel, Mike saw a flying wedge of raiders begin a new charge toward the rear of the house, their approach partially screened by a fog of drifting dust and gunsmoke. Without

waiting to pick individuals targets, he fired five times in swift succession and watched that charge turn into a tumultuous tangle of plunging horses and cursing men.

Another bullet caromed off a blade directly above Mike, kicking the becalmed windmill into a brief, clanking turn.

Then Mike's smoke-smarted eyes glimpsed another rush of riders streaming from the blacksmith shop's sheltering darkness. Guns blasted at the house and two horses went down as if snared by the same rope. But the other riders kept coming; they were within fifteen feet of the kitchen doorway. Mike was crawling into firing position when the impact of a bullet against his left shoulder almost knocked him off the narrow platform. He grunted a curse, yet even then, with sharp splinters of pain spiraling across his back, Melody Mike kept his eyes focused on those five men who'd reached the protecting wall of the L-shaped house and were raking the kitchen with shot slanted from both sides of the bullet-smashed window. If they once got into that room there'd be no chance for Lindabelle, nor Padre Paul, nor Jim Shannon.

Burdette crawled to the platform's edge. When he lifted the Winchester his right arm was like a long sheath of pain. He peered down for a target and glimpsed Luke Tannenbaum's big body outlined against a fire-brightened wall near the kitchen. Tannenbaum's gun was tilted up, its muzzle stabbing out little splinters of yellow flame as Mike fired. A slug sliced across a plank showering Mike's face with slivers—spoiling his aim. He cursed and resisting a savage impulse to blaze away wildly, took deliberate aim.

Burdette was pressing the trigger when a bullet burned across his left temple. For a brief, blank interval he crouched in confusion, remotely aware of a swift numbness that blotted out all sense of pain. It didn't occur to Melody Mike that he'd missed death by a feather-fine margin; he cursed the blood that dribbled into his left eye and the queer weakness that made the Winchester seem too heavy to hold. He wiped his smarting eye on an uphunched shoulder and tried to tally Tannenbaum in that group against the wall.

Grimly, methodically, Mike fired and saw a shadowy form collapse. He chose another target, fired again and again, until trickling blood blurred his vision—until the numbness clamped tighter and tighter around his head. He tried to wipe the red wetness out of his eyes—tried to find those targets near the kitchen window. But his eyes wouldn't focus.

Abruptly then there was silence. A strange, vacuum-like hush so empty it made his ears ache. He felt a cool breeze against his face and soon after that he heard the slow clanking of the big wooden blades turning above him. Presently he heard a voice—Lindabelle's sweet-toned voice, calling his name.

He was wondering about that when the platform planks came rushing up. They smashed against his face with a great burst of bright lights. . . .

LATER Mike Burdette heard voices again. And music. But there was no wind against his face and no blades clanking above him. One of the voices belonged to Big Dutch Drake but the words, didn't make much sense. "I brung his music-box along with the pardon."

For a lazy, lingering interval Mike just lay there listening to the soft music and the droning voices. He heard Padre Paul say: "With God's aid, Mike Burdette killed Tannenbaum and saved us all."

And Pop Dulaine's Celtic voice declared fervently: "That he did, begorrah!"

When Mike opened his eyes he saw Lindabelle sitting close beside him, her slim fingers holding his hand. . . .

"Mike—you've awakened at last!" she exclaimed.

She was smiling through tear-misted eyes that seemed odd to Melody Mike. Then he remembered Jim Shannon's fifty-fifty chance. Jim, he guessed, had died, which was why there were tears in Lindy's eyes. He said, "I'm sorry about Jim."

"But there's no need to be," Lindabelle declared. "Jim has been sitting up in bed for two days."

Two days! Then how long . . .

What day is this?" Melody Mike asked.

"Why—I'm not sure," Lindabelle admitted, and plucked a piece of paper from her lap. "But it's a beautiful day for us, Mike—the most beautiful ever!"

Then she showed him the paper, which carried the official seal of Arizona Territory and the words *Full Pardon* printed in bold, black type. . . .

Even then Mike wasn't sure, until she leaned over and kissed him and said gently, "I knew it would be like this some day. That's why I kept fresh curtains in the windows at MB."

Outside the bedroom window Padre Paul eased back on the veranda bench and declared: "The Scriptures plainly promise that the meek shall inherit the earth."

"At least six feet of it," Big Dutch Drake agreed.

But Melody Mike Burdette wasn't listening to that conversation. He was savoring the sweetness of Lindabelle's lips, hearing all the things she was telling him—without the use of words. . . .

THE END

Old Rough and Ready

By Harry Van Demark

A mine named for General Zachary Taylor found its owners plenty rough .... And thoroughly ready to keep its rich treasure trove to themselves—until 500 other miners suddenly developed other ideas!

NEWS of the discovery of gold at Sutter's Mill in California led to one of the most remarkable movements of population in the history of the United States. Five years before this famous gold rush of 1849 there were barely 500 Americans in California. Yet, four years after the gold rush began, the population of the State was 300,000. In the interval, the argonaut had become one of the heroic figures of history. In a short period this figure had succeeded in having the center of population shifted westward for more than eighty miles.

Across the plains, around Cape Horn, over the Isthmus of Panama, the treasure-seekers hurried. They penetrated to every gulch, ravine, basin, canyon, flat, bar and bench in the mining district. Men who at home had been sedate leaders, honored by their fellows, who had never dreamed of appearing in public in anything but immaculate clothing, suddenly found themselves boon companions of laboring men and women without education.

The lust for gold was common to all of them, and this made them ready to endure hardships together; to forego every luxury and to suffer untold privation in the search for the treasure that sometimes eluded them, but more often, in the early days, rewarded their efforts.

Quickly the gold country, which for centuries had known only the rare Indian hunter, was thickly dotted with mining camps. Some of these were doomed to failure after a few days or weeks. Others persisted for months or years. Some, like Placerville—the old Hangtown of the pioneers—became permanent. There, in later years, both the business streets, and some of the residential streets, perpetuated the miners' paths that wound through the hills.

Of the camps that have disappeared, leaving no mark, one of the most famous was Rough and Ready, begun in 1849 by a company from Shellsburg, Wisconsin, which, after crossing the mountains by the Truckee route, paused on the banks of the Yuba River, close to the modern town of Grass Valley.

The new camp took its name from the company, which, from the days of its departure from Wisconsin, had called itself "Rough and Ready" because its captain had served under General Zachary Taylor in the Winnebago War.

Later, while hunting grizzlies and deer, a man in the company stooped to drink of the water in the ravine below Randolph Flat. As he did so he found a piece of gold. Prosperity followed. The camp was soon removed to its new location and two good-sized cabins were built.

The ten men in the original company were followed by a second company from Missouri, whose members, after some argument, agreed with the original group that the two parties would monopolize the rich diggings in the vicinity of the camp.

The Randolph Company, as the Missourians called themselves, built two cabins at the head of the Flat and went to work industriously. It soon became apparent that the rich diggings required more workmen, so the leader of the Rough and Ready Company went East to secure forty men as helpers.

Men responded eagerly to his offer of a year's work for the same wages they would have received for such work at home, plus traveling expenses and food. All were eager for adventure and excitement.

But during his absence miners came to Rough and Ready in a rush. Of course, they refused to recognize the monopoly and by September, 1850, five hundred of them were taking out the gold from the rich sand and quartz of the gulch.

Rough and Ready's greatest fame came to it through Bret Harte, who gave standing in literature to the mining camps of the Sierras, including Rough and Ready, which he seemed to regard with peculiar affection.

Ride Wide of Buzzard Well!

CHAPTER ONE

Buzzard Bait

THERE was something sinister about the old stage station at Buzzard Well. Even its name had an ugly sound. And its ground had been spattered with blood, and its thick adobe walls bullet-pocked, long before Kate Kavanaugh and her two tough nephews, Burt and Hurley, and Kate's good-looking niece, Alma, took it over. These four added their share of evil to the place. A silence hung over the adobe buildings and mesquite corrals like a death pall, and even a stranger coming here for the first time felt that uneasiness beneath its quiet. It was as if something lay in wait, watching but hidden, ready to strike with deadly swiftness and without a whisper of warning. You felt it when you

Smashing Range-war Novel

By Walt Coburn

Johnny went into a crouch and yanked his gun.

rode up, day or night. And when you got inside the adobe walls it was there. Even the mingled odors of whiskey and stale tobacco smoke and greasy cooking could not quite hide it.

Buzzard Well stage station squatted at the foot of a mountain range, with the vast Arizona desert spread on either side. And from the barren butte nearby which served as a lookout point, Kate Kavanaugh could see far into Mexico, even without the aid of her powerful field glasses. Across the great desert, spotted with cactus and mesquite, the feed was good and the water holes always filled during the rainy seasons. The same desert was marked by the bleached bones of cat-

The chips were down in that deadly game at Kate Kavanaugh's bleak Buzzard Well hideout, giving Tubac Jones, Ranger captain, no choice but to tough out his hand against Kate's ace-high killer-crew, with nothing to bet on but a pair of black sixes—and a war-torn cattleland empire in the pot!

tle and horses trapped there to die slowly under a brassy sun when drought shriveled the water holes and parched the grass.

Kate Kavanaugh was up at the lookout station now, in the cool dusk that followed the sunset—a tall, large-boned woman who always moved lithely and without the slightest waste motion. She could have been in her late thirties; Kate Kavanaugh did not show any certain age. She wore her coarse black hair parted in the middle and brushed back to a large knot at the back of her neck. Her skin was the color of old ivory, and unwrinkled save for tiny lines etched at the corners of her gray eyes. The eyes were set deeply under heavy black brows on either side of a slender, rather sharply shaped nose. A handsome woman, arrogant and stern-willed and domineering at times, she never laughed, seldom smiled. She dressed severely in black, even on the hottest Arizona summer days, with a large cameo brooch the only jewelry she ever wore. Her well-kept hands were ringless, though she had been married, it was rumored, to four or five men who had, each in their turn, met violent deaths.

Sometimes Kate Kavanaugh would put on man's pants and boots and ride out to work cattle, sitting her horse like she'd been born in a saddle. Her gloved hands handled a catch-rope with an easy skill, and she had a remarkable memory for brands and earmarks. No cowman anywhere could run an outfit better than Kate Kavanaugh. She would make a top cowhand anywhere; that, grimly added her enemies, would include the rustling of cattle. She rode a string of top horses she'd handled since they were colts and had broken herself. When a bronc pitched, she rode him. And she was as handy with any kind of a gun as she was with a catch-rope or running iron.

Although more than a few men had loved Kate Kavanaugh, many men hated her and a lot more feared her. Numbered among the latter were her two cattle rustling, quick-triggered nephews, Burt and Hurley Kavanaugh. She ruled them without mercy—gave them their orders and saw to it that those orders were carried out to the last small detail. Kate Kavanaugh never excused any kind of failure.

Alma Kavanaugh was as different from her Aunt Kate as noonday sun is different from moonless midnight. She was a tall, willowy, ash-blonde, with large, black-fringed violet eyes and a soft, yielding mouth that smiled too readily at all men. Timid of horses, she was languid almost to the point of sheer laziness, and either unable or unwilling to cook a meal or soil her beautiful white hands at housework. She was useless around a ranch, or around this saloon and stage station which was also a hideout for renegades and a blind for Kate Kavanaugh's cattle rustling trade.

Alma Kavanaugh did not seem to belong here, and yet she was far more valuable to her aunt, at times, than were Kate's pair of hard-riding, gun-slinging nephews. And Alma was the one and only person, man or woman, who was not even secretly afraid of Kate Kavanaugh, despite the fact that she, like her two older brothers, took her Aunt Kate's orders.

KATE KAVANAUGH, up at the lookout point, scanned the vast stretch of desert with her field glasses. She had spent most of the day, since sunrise, watching the big trail herd of cattle that had come up out of Mexico some time during last night. The cattle had slowed down with the heat of the day and finally had sulled, whereupon the five men handling the drive had let the beasts scatter and spread out on feed and water. Kate Kavanaugh now laid aside her field glasses and gave her eyes a rest. She sat there in the shade of the granite boulder cabin, rolling and smoking cigarettes, her gray eyes hard, restless, and brooding. And for a long time she didn't move.

In the last hour before sunset she resumed her vigil and her powerful glasses again picked up the five riders whenever they showed up in clearings. Around sundown she watched the five riders until they were out of sight and hidden by the brush. Then, perhaps half an hour later, she picked up two riders driving their little remuda and pack mules ahead of them. The other three riders did not reappear—then or ever. And a faint, tight, twisted smile played around the corners of Kate Kavanaugh's red mouth.

Kate Kavanaugh lighted and smoked another brown paper cigarette, then picked up her powerful field glasses and swept the whole desert strip again. As she did, her smile faded and her gray eyes narrowed at sight of the lone rider who had suddenly appeared as if by some conjurer's trick on the trail leading to Buzzard Well from the west and north. The rider was coming from the direction of the big Gillette 76 ranch, past Pete Lusk's place at Agua Caliente near the old round-up trail.

For a long time Kate Kavanaugh studied the approaching rider and horse, her black brows knitted somberly. Then, when horse and rider were within about a thousand yards of her, she put the glasses back in their saddle leather case and picked up the high-powered rifle canted against the rock wall of the little lookout cabin. She lined the gun sights, the rear sight raised to the last notch, holding the bead steady for almost a minute. Then, slowly, she lowered the gun and let down the hammer. The range had been too great; besides she'd had no intention of shooting. And

shots merely intended as warnings were not Kate Kavanaugh's way.

Now, she called down to Alma, who was lying in a large Mexican hammock swung between two giant cottonwoods. Her voice, low-pitched, husky, carried the couple of hundred yards to the girl below, but went little farther.

"Company comin' from the 76, Alma. One lone rider. Take care of him."

Alma dog-leafed the page in her paper-backed novel and swung long silken legs from the hammock. Then she stood up and stretched like a cat, a dreamy look in her violet eyes. Tall and slim, she was wearing a pale green cotton house dress that accentuated her soft, rounded bosom.

Kate Kavanaugh's red mouth reflected the younger woman's smile, but there was a hint of mockery in her voice now as she called down again to the girl below. "It's not young Johnny Gillette, Alma."

Alma looked up the rocky slope and her short nose wrinkled. Then she shrugged her shoulders and stretched in the hammock again with her book, one slender, silken leg dangling.

"The boys will be drifting in about an hour from now," Kate notified the girl in the hammock. "Amuse the stranger while I look him over."

She put down the gun and took out the field glasses again and kept them in focus while the rider aproached, his sweat-marked horse traveling at a tired lope.

The rider reached the big horse trough near the barn, finally, and from under the dust-powdered brim of his Stetson gazed down at Alma lying in the hammock, apparently asleep. Then he dismounted, and slipping the headstall from his horse's ears, stood there near the head of his drinking horse, a faint, mirthless grin on his leathery face. Six feet tall, with lean, saddle-hardened legs, the man was wearing a faded denim brush jacket and brush scarred chaps. A week's dusty whiskers covered his face around a thin, high-bridged nose. His eyes were a pale blue under crooked sun-bleached brows, and his sweat-matted, tow-colored hair was so light it was hard to tell whether or not it was gray.

"Sleepin' beauty." The man's voice was a lazy drawl. "Shore purty." And his whiskered grin spread a little as he watched Alma Kavanaugh pretend to awaken.

KATE KAVANAUGH had recognized him now, and her gray eyes narrowed, her mouth thinning to a hard line. She lifted the glasses again and she picked up the two riders out on the desert, not more than a few miles, now, from Buzzard Well. Presently she returned the glasses to their leather case and laid them on a shelf, shoving the rifle into a leather scabbard that hung on the rock wall. Then she stuck a small black flag into a metal socket, and as the pennant caught the evening breeze, Kate Kavanaugh walked down the steep trail with long, effortless strides.

Alma was in the adobe saloon behind the bar and the visitor was having a drink of whiskey when Kate Kavanaugh got there. His horse had been watered and fed and stabled.

The man grinned flatly and lifted his hat. "You're lookin' plumb fine, Kate."

"And why not?" She eyed him coldly. "You're off your home range, Tubac."

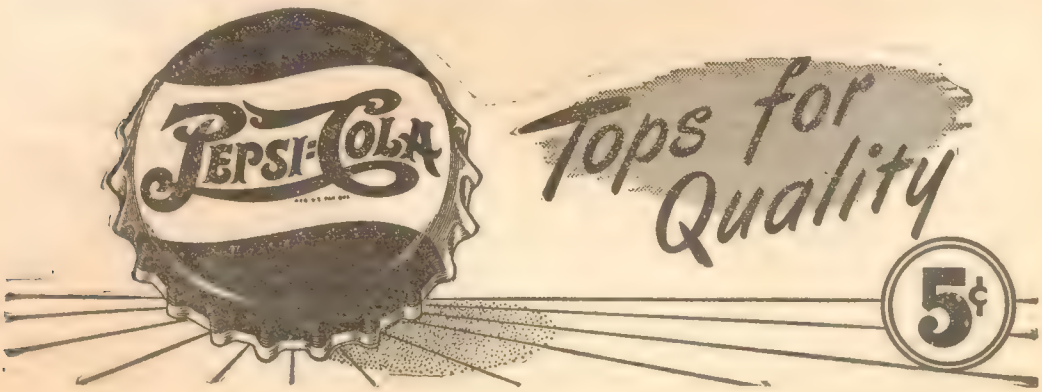
Tubac Jones nodded. "You don't expect a man to stand in one place till he grows roots, Kate. Got to untrack myself once in a while."

"So I hear. Somebody said you were the new Captain of this Arizona Rangers outfit."

"Somebody," said Tubac Jones, "is always talkin' outa turn."

"Alma," said Kate Kavanaugh, in her soft, husky voice, "this is Tubac Jones. He's called Tubac because he has a cow outfit way off yonder near the old Tubac mission. Tubac, this is my niece, Alma—sister to Burt and Hurley. He knew your father, Jack Kavanaugh, Alma. Matter of fact, he killed Jack Kavanaugh."

"You make it sound bad, Kate," said the



man. "And just when me'n the purty lady was gittin' acquainted good."

Alma's smile was still soft, meaningless. The look in her violet eyes never changed, but she studied Tubac Jones with frank interest.

"Saved the Law the trouble of hanging him, didn't you?" Alma had a languid voice that went well with the violet tone of her black-fringed eyes.

"That was the general opinion," grinned Tubac Jones. "But Kate here don't always see eye to eye with the Law. You won't poison my likker, Alma?"

"I don't even know where Aunt Kate keeps the strychnine," smiled Alma Kavanaugh. "Sherry, Aunt Kate? Or don't you want to drink with Tubac Jones?"

"Sherry," nodded Kate Kavanaugh. "I always have a glass of sherry before supper, and I'm not letting Tubac Jones or anybody else cheat me out of it. . . . What fetches you here to Buzzard Well, Tubac?"

"Cow business. Lookin' for a feller named Pete Lusk. He wasn't at his Agua Caliente ranch, and I figgered I might cut his sign here."

"Pete Lusk isn't here," said Kate Kavanaugh slowly, "and I don't look for him to show up here."

"Then I'll borrow the use of your lookout yonder, Kate," Tubac said coolly, "and watch the buzzards."

"Watch the buzzards?" Alma smiled.

Tubac Jones filled his empty glass. "Yeah. Out yonder on that stretch between here and the Border. You watch the buzzards gather and circle. Then if you see 'em all light, you ride out yonder and that's where you find your man. It saves a lot of wasteful ridin'."

Tubac Jones cut Kate a hard look from under his slanted hat brim. Kate smiled faintly and lifted her glass of sherry.

"I'll remember that, Tubac, if ever you turn up missing. Here's how."

"You ain't drinkin', Miss Alma?" Tubac asked politely.

Alma poured sherry into a small wineglass. "Why not?"

Tubac's faded blue eyes puckered to slits as he drank. He put down his empty glass then and pulled a wad of crumpled banknotes from his pocket. Peeling off a twenty dollar bill, he smoothed it out and pushed it across the bar.

"It's from that Nevada train hold up," he grinned. "That's the only kind of money I got on me right now, Kate. Feller sluffed off more'n three hundred dollars of it onto me in a stud game at Tombstone."

Kate picked up the twenty dollar bill, examined it, read the serial number on it, and shoved it back at him with a faint smile.

"Put him on the free list, Alma. We don't want that kind of money at Buzzard Well."

"I should say not," smiled Alma. "But we wouldn't have known it was stolen money if you hadn't told us, mister. That seems to me like a silly thing to do."

"About as foolish," smiled Kate Kavanaugh thinly, "as riding the grubline here to my place. Jack Kavanaugh was my brother, and Burt and Hurley are apt to show up here soon."

"Burt and Hurley," said Tubac Jones calmly, "don't dast spit their tobacco out till you give 'em orders to, Kate. I'm bankin' on your keepin' them two nephews of yourn in line."

"Sounds like a threat," said Kate Kavanaugh in her soft, level voice.

"Nope, just advice. Though you don't need it. You're too level-headed to make a mistake."

TUBAC JONES had his glass filled again when Burt and Hurley Kavanaugh rode up and swung from their saddles. They had their guns in their hands as they stomped into the adobe saloon.

They looked enough alike so that when they were together you knew they were brothers, though Burt was tall and raw-boned and Hurley was shorter and thick-set. Both had reddish sandy hair and gray-green eyes and the same jutting nose and thin-lipped mouths.

"Put up your guns, boys," said Kate Kavanaugh quietly. "You know Tubac Jones; don't try to get nasty with him, because he'd kill you both before you got your hammers back. Only way either of you stand a chance with Tubac Jones is to dry-gulch him."

The pair glared at Tubac Jones, their bloodshot eyes green as bottle glass, then walked to the bar. Alma smiled at them and shoved two small glasses across the bar.

"Tubac is looking," mentioned Kate Kavanaugh, "for Pete Lusk."

"Then he picked the hell of a wrong place to cut Pete Lusk's trail," snapped Burt. His voice had a nasal twang. "Pete ain't here."

"I got plenty time on my hands," said Tubac Jones idly, "and this makes a good place to wait. Nice cool shade, and good corn likker. Who you got cookin' for you now, Kate? That drunken Yaqui woman?"

"Rose," said Kate, "is Apache. And she only gets drunk on special occasions. Like funerals." And she smiled faintly.

"She'd shore go on a week's bender at my wake," grinned Tubac Jones. "Last time she come at me with a meat cleaver in one hand and a butcher knife in the other. Somebody'd told her I'd killed Jacked Kavanaugh. . . . That's how long since? Ten years?"

"Twelve," said Kate.

"Burt and Hurley was still fuzzy-faced buttons then," nodded Tubac Jones, "and

Alma just a leggy kid—all eyes an' palomino hair. But dressed up shore purty. . . . I seen Burt and Hurley a time or two since. They've growed a-plenty more ways than one. And Alma shore would look good on the stage at the Bird Cage Opera House at Tombstone. You're the only one ain't changed, Kate."

Tubac Jones turned to face Burt and Hurley Kavanaugh. The grin was still on his leathery face, but his faded blue eyes were bleak.

"Where'd you boys leave Pete Lusk?" he demanded flatly.

"None of your damned business!" flared Burt.

"Nowheres!" Hurley snarled.

"Take it easy," said Kate Kavanaugh quietly. "That goes for you, likewise, Tubac. I had my sights lined on your briskit when you rode up. I could have shot you. Don't make me sorry I didn't pull the trigger. And don't crowd your luck here, Ranger."

Tubac shrugged his hard, lean shoulders. "Like I said, Kate. I kin watch the buzzards—tomorrow, next day."

A short, fat, almost black-skinned Indian woman appeared in the doorway, her full-skirted dress covered by a big, clean white apron. Her opaque black eyes stared hard at Tubac Jones.

"Supper," said Apache Rose. "Come an' git it." She was gone on moccasined feet as soundlessly as she had come.

CHAPTER TWO

No Holds Barred!

TOM GILLETTE claimed that the surest way in the world to plumb ruin a colt was to ride him with a spade bit. And he treated his only son Johnny like a green bronc—riding him with a hackamore on an easy rein. When stories of Johnny's wild escapades reached the Old Man, he just chuckled and told the tale-teller that he wouldn't give a damn for a son that didn't have some hell raisin' in him. Johnny, Tom Gillette declared, was all he had, and someday he'd die off and leave him the big 76 outfit. Then if the boy wanted to go through it like water through a tin horn, he, the Old Man, wouldn't be around to watch, anyhow. And he did like to watch Johnny travel high, wide and handsome.

"You tend to your own knittin'," Old Man Gillette told Caid Wilcox, who ramrodded Gillette's lower outfit, down on the flats. "Let Johnny run his upper outfit and gather his wild cattle. Hell, Johnny Gillette ketches them big outlaw steers on slants you'd lead your horse down."

"He wasn't gatherin' no wild cattle when I seen him lollygaggin' around Alma Kavanaugh at Buzzard Well," said Wilcox.

"And what in the hell was you a-doin' at Buzzard Well, Caid?"

That had stopped the big, handsome Caid. And later, when Old Man Tom had told Johnny about it, Johnny had chuckled and said Purty Caid's nose was out of joint on account of Caid couldn't swing a tight enough loop to ketch and hold attractive Alma Kavanaugh.

"Kate Kavanaugh'd be glad to marry Alma off to me, Tom," Johnny explained, "because she'd like that Alma should marry the Seventy-Six outfit. That'd give Aunt Kate a tail-holt on the Seventy-Six and she'd move Burt and Hurley in on the deal. Kate won't stand for Alma marryin' Purty Caid or any other common cowhand workin' for wages. Caid picks up his share of side money handlin' stolen Mexican cattle for Kate, but that ain't enough. She wants Alma to shove her purty palomino head into my loop. Gits Aunt Kate shore ringy when Alma keeps a-dodgin' my throws."

"You loopin' at Alma Kavanaugh, Johnny?"

"Practicin', Tom," chuckled Johnny, "just a-practicin'. But gamble your last dollar on this. When Alma picks her man, Aunt Kate or Burt or Hurley or nobody is goin' to stop her. Alma's got a mind of her own, but hides it under all that buckskin hair and her soft eyes. If ever she gits her dander up, Aunt Kate will know that for all her soft purrin', Alma's a wildcat. . . . But Alma's man ain't come down the trail yet."

"What's this about Caid Wilcox handlin' stolen cattle, Johnny?"

The laughter went out of Johnny Gillette's blue-gray eyes, and for a moment he looked a lot older than his twenty-five years.

"I'll take good care of Purty Caid," he said grimly, "when the sign is right. He's playin' a deep game. Give that dally man enough rope and he'll tangle himself in that sixty-foot Mexican rawhide reata he swings."

Old Man Tom Gillette tugged at his gray mustache. "Caid Wilcox is dangerous, son. For all his purty looks, Caid is bad medicine. Have the bulge before you start anything."

Johnny laughed and said he reckoned he could take his own part—declared he'd give Caid cards and spades, and then beat him.

That was when Old Man Tom Gillette sent word to his border neighbor, Tubac Jones, to ride over to the 76 headquarters ranch when he could get around to it and they'd split a jug of corn. Tom had been badly crippled a few years ago by a horse turning over on him and he walked with a heavy limp and carried a cane on his saddle when he rode around the ranch for a short hour or two every day. Otherwise he'd have ridden to Tubac, who was rumored to be holding down the dangerous

job of a Captain in the Arizona Rangers.

Tubac Jones would have dropped any kind of chore to help out Tom Gillette. Old Tom had sided him in more than one tight; had tamed Tubac's wild ways and staked him to the cow outfit he now ran near the old Tubac mission after they had wiped out Jack Kavanaugh and his gang of border-jumper rustlers. Tubac Jones had been no older than twenty-two or three when he'd shot it out with tough Jack Kavanaugh while Old Man Gillette was knocking Kavanaugh's cattle thieves out of their saddles as fast as he could lever cartridges into the breech of his Winchester carbine. Tubac was still on the younger side of forty, but he'd been a law officer of some kind or another since he was nineteen, when Jack Kavanaugh had killed his father, who was riding for the Border Patrol. Kavanaugh had tried to steal the Jones ranch near Tubac and would have gotten it if Tom Gillette had not run Kavanaugh off. And so old Tom Gillette was like an older brother to Tubac Jones.

Johnny Gillette wasn't at the 76 ranch when Tubac Jones got there; Johnny had gone back to the upper outfit in the mountains. And at about the same hour after sunset when Tubac Jones rode up to Buzzard Well Johnny Gillette reined up on the brushy rim that looked down on the Lusk ranch at Agua Caliente.

FOR perhaps half an hour Johnny watched from the brushy rim, squatted on his spurred bootheels, smoking one cigarette after another. While his horse grazed, bridle reins trailing, Johnny watched the little outfit below the hot springs that gave the ranch its name of Hot Water. Finally, after his fifth cigarette, he got to his feet and hitched up his sagging cartridge belt and chaps. A little shorter than medium height, with wide shoulders and a thick chest and saddle-muscled legs, he stood compactly, one hundred and sixty pounds of hard muscle and tough bone. His hair was wiry black and he had a short nose, wide mouth and blunt jaw. Johnny was naturally good natured—until somebody crossed him. Then he fought with everything he had.

He rode down the steep rocky trail, now, to the basin ranch below. He was within a couple hundred yards of the adobe buildings and mesquite corrals when a carbine cracked and a .30-30 bullet kicked up gravel a dozen feet ahead of his horse, warning him back. But his wide mouth flattened in a grin as he touched his horse with the spurs and continued on down the rocky trail. A second and a third shot whined past his head, but he paid no more attention to the bullets than he would have to so many flies.

Johnny Gillette was within a hundred feet of the big corral when the pole gate swung open and a girl's voice lashed at him.

"Darn you! You—you big lummox!"

Bridget Lusk was nineteen—five feet two without her high-heeled boots. Slim as a boy, she had cut her heavy curly red hair off to shoulder length because it got in her way when she was riding down mavericks in the brushy mountain country. She had a short little nose and a stubborn chin and her tanned face was spotted with freckles. Now her sleeves were rolled up above the elbows and her patched cotton shirt and old Levi overalls were blood-spattered and there was a curved skinning knife in her small hand.

"You get down off that horse, Johnny, and I'll rip your darned gizzard out!" And her brown eyes blazed with anger.

"I hope you had sense enough to cut the brand outa the hide, Biddy. And you better practice up on your shootin'. You never even scratched my hide."

"You darned sneaker! If I'd wanted to hit you—"

She came at him with the bloody skinning knife as he stepped off his horse. He just stood there, legs spread, thumbs hooked in his chaps' belt, until she got close. Then, when she dropped the knife and choked back a dry sob and tried to run to the house, he grabbed her. She bit and scratched and kicked, but he held her until she wore out her strength and was quivering and sobbing uncontrollably. Then he gently rumpled her curly red hair and took a clean handkerchief from his pocket and dried her tears. And after that Johnny Gillettte calmly kissed her and lifted her to the top of the corral.

"Now sit there like a red-headed rail bird, Biddy," he grinned, and picking up the skinning knife, went into the corral to finish butchering the partly skinned yearling.

THERE was a big 76 brand on the hide. Johnny grinned up at the girl, and Bridget Lusk tried to grin back. But there was a stricken look now in her warm, brown eyes.

"I was hoping that man would come back and ketch me at it," she told him vehemently, "so he could take me to jail where you put my dad. And where you'll put my brother, Pete, when that Ranger ketches him. Cattle thieves! Every damn' Lusk is a rotten dirty thief!"

"How many times I told you that cussin' ain't for girls?" Johnny reprimanded her. "I thought we compromised on 'darn.' Now, who's this man you're talkin' about?"

"Tubac Jones," the girl answered, "the new Ranger captain. Pete told me. He was here this noon, askin' for Pete. I told him Pete was at Buzzard Well, makin' a fool of himself, like you do, over that da—darned Alma! And he told me my dad was in jail at Nogales —that the Law was keepin' Pike Lusk on ice

till he cooled off. Then he said he'd be back this way to pick me up because this was no place for a kid like me to be alone. Said I'd be better off in Nogales, goin' to school. Talked to me like I was ten years old and backward-minded at that. So I aimed to show Mister Ranger Tubac Jones a thing or two—and then it had to be you that come snoopin'. Well, let your darned old Seventy-Six beef rot there on the ground! I'd choke on a bite of the best steak you could cut off it."

"You'd have choked to death long ago, button," grinned Johnny, "if Seventy-Six meat affected you. You was raised on it. And that reminds me—I ain't had a bite since before daybreak. How's about you washin' up and cookin' me some supper? And don't worry about Pike—Pike's doin' all right. He'd won ten bucks off the jailer playin' poker and was workin' on a quart of tequila when I left him. By now Pike Lusk has probably pokered the pore son of a gun plumb outa his jail keys. Them Mexicans can't play poker with Pike. He reads their hands by lookin' at their faces. And anyhow, if Pike wants out that bad, I'd've paid his fine when I paid mine yesterday mornin'. Only Pike was stubborn. Said we'd bin jailed by mistake—that shootin' up the saloons was an old border custom. . . ."

"What are you talking about, Johnny?"

"Jail. The *carcel* at Nogales, Sonora, where some new cop who didn't know us or savvy our playful ways jugged me and your red-headed daddy for busting a few pistol caps. Helpin' the *paisanos* celebrate their *Cinco de Mayo* holiday."

"Caid Wilcox said dad was in jail at Nogales for rustling Seventy Six cattle. But he said Nogales, Arizona—not across the line at Nogales, Sonora. Caid said—"

"Caid said!" grinned Johnny, his blue-gray eyes hard, "*Caid* said! Gosh sakes, set the words to music and sing it like a song! When was that spur-jingler here a-twistin' his little waxed mustache?"

"A few days ago. Looking for Pete. He said you'd caught Pike Lusk branding mavericks on your upper range and took him to Nogales to jail."

"And I bet you cooked him a nice batch of sourdough biscuits and let him hold your hand and—all right, what's so damned comical?"

"You needn't cuss about it. Caid Wilcox likes biscuits with wild honey. Couldn't be you're jealous of Purty Caid, could it?"

"Naw, you're just a kid. But if ever that lady killer lays a hand on that sorrel mane of yours I'll gut-shoot him. And then I'll turn you over and wear out a quirt on the seat of your Levis."

"It's Alma Kavanaugh you two are jealous about," sniffed Biddy, "that perfumed palomino hussy. That lily-fingered lady with her

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silk stockings and French-heeled slippers and—"

"You're bloody as a butcher, button. Gosh sakes, skin outa them patched Levis and that rag of a shirt. Put on a dress for once and let your hair grow back into shape and mebbyso—aw, hell, now what have I said? Bawlin' again!"

Johnny yanked her down from the corral and Bridget Lusk blinked the tears back out of her dark eyes and swallowed the lump in her throat. Her voice was barely audible now.

"You're right. . . . I am just a ragged brat. And my father's a drunken cow thief and my brother trails with the Kavanaugh boys. But all I own are a couple of cheap little mail order dresses, and I never had a pair of silk stockings in my life. I have to make a brush-popper cowhand because there are a few head of cattle in my iron and if I don't brand my own calves somebody like Burt and Hurley Kavanaugh will put 'em in the KK iron for the josh of it. I cut my hair off because it would come unbraided and hang up in the catclaw and mesquite. I'm a dirty-faced little pug-nosed red-head, and all the bottles of perfume on Alma Kavanaugh's shelf couldn't take the stable stink off my hide!"

JOHNNY GILLETTE'S tanned face lost color. His voice was gentle as he took the girl's freckled face in his hands and looked down into her hurt eyes.

"I wouldn't change you, Biddy," he said soberly, "not any part of you. And some day you'll have all the silk stockin's and perfume and satin dresses you kin wear. But I'll gamble a 5X beaver Stetson that you'll be sheddin' 'em all and wearin' old Levis again, and I'd feel plumb lonesome if you didn't show up at the round-up. And you couldn't ride a cuttin' horse in silks and satins—you'd start a stampede. And I couldn't quit work in the middle of the round-up to slip to town to visit my bride. So, if ever you git high-toned society on me I'll bat down the purty ears of Missus Johnnie Gillette because it's this little raggedy-patched Biddy I'm wantin' for better and worse, and I love you so much it hurts me plumb down to my briskit. And if that ain't enough for a speech I'll git my second wind and commence again!"

The girl tensed. "No, Johnny. Don't say anything more—please! Alma'll make you a good wife—the kind you can be proud to claim in any company. And I'm not feelin' sorry for myself now—honest Injun. Only don't talk any more nonsense like that again. Now let go of me and I'll build you a batch of hot biscuits. I'm—I'm all right now."

Johnny Gillette shook his head. "That's no way to talk, Biddy. Can't you see I'm askin' you to marry me? It never struck me before, but now I know I've been in love with you all the time and never realized it. This ain't foolin'. This is playin' for keeps."

Bridget Lusk bit her lower lip, and for a moment was afraid to trust her voice because of the aching lump in her throat. Then suddenly she threw her arms around his neck and great sobs shook her as he held her close.

Neither of them heard the sound of the hoofs, nor saw the man on the leg-weary, sweat-streaked horse until he was almost upon them. The rider, his red-whiskered face caked with dried blood, was weaving in his saddle like a drunken man, but there was a six-shooter clamped in his right hand. It was his voice, abrupt and snarling, that jerked them apart.

"Damn you, Johnny, let go my sister! I'm killin' you in your tracks!" and Pete Lusk raised the Colt.

Johnny went into a crouch and yanked his own gun, but before he could attempt to shoot the weapon from Pete Lusk's hand, the other had fired.

Terror-stricken, Bridget Lusk had run to the corral and leaped on the saddled horse she had left tied there.

Johnny threw himself flat on the ground as he realized Pete Lusk had missed him, then was up like the bounce of a ball and was catching Pete as he slid drunkenly from the saddle.

He whirled at the sound of Bridget's horse behind him. "Where do you think you're goin'?" he demanded abruptly.

"For a doctor, of course!" cried Bridget Lusk. "He shot you, Johnny! You're bleeding!"

"Beef blood." Johnny grinned at her as he gathered Pete Lusk in his arms and lifted him down. "Must've come off your Levis when I kissed yuh. Now git down off that horse and quit actin' like a spooked bronc!"

Bridget sighed with relief and dismounted.

"We'll take him to the hot spring, Biddy," he told the girl. "He's bin shot—lost a lot of blood. Fetch bandages. . . ."

Johnny cut away Pete Lusk's shirt and undershirt and carefully bathed the ugly bullet rip in the man's shoulder. Pete's bloodshot gray-black eyes blinked open and his white teeth bared in a red-whiskered snarl.

"Aw, for gosh sakes, Pete, behave!" admonished Johnny Gillette. "Who shot you? You act like I'd done it."

"Damn you, you leave that kid sister of mine alone!"

"I'm marryin' Bridget," said Johnny flatly, "and takin' her away from this greasy hide-out hole. She'll be my wife, mister, and she'll be treated like she was a lady, not somethin' for you and that old man of yours to kick around when you're drunk and ornery. Furthermore, if it wasn't for Biddy I'd let Pike Lusk rot in the pen and let you crawl off in

the brush and die for a damned cattle-stealin' coyote!"

Pete Lusk lay back on the tarp-covered bed his sister had lugged to the edge of the hot sulphur spring. His bloodshot eyes stared hard at Johnny. Then he forced a grin.

"You ain't lyin' to me, Johnny? About Biddy?"

"Your damned right I ain't lyin'! I'm takin' her to the Seventy Six Ranch. Tom's housekeeper will look after her till I git back from my snake hunt. I'm giving Pike a chance, when he's sober enough to listen to reason, to stay on here if he wants to. Otherwise I'll buy him out at his own price and he kin drift. When you git back on your feet, I'll give you a week to quit the country—before the Rangers cut you down. I'm doin' that on account of Biddy. Got that clear in your thick skull now?"

Pete Lusk sat up slowly and gingerly tested his bullet-ripped shoulder. "You tell it shore scarey, Johnny. But it's a deal. . . . I was kinda locoed when I rode up. I'd rode a long ways, shot up, and was full of rotgut tequila, to boot. In the dim light I taken you for somebody else—you're about Hurley Kavanaugh's build, and that damned Hurley's had his eye on the Biddy kid. So has Burt. Hurley'd gone so far as to try to make a dicker—swap me his sister for mine. So when I sighted you an' Biddy there in the dusk I figgered it was Hurley Kavanaugh. Then when I come alive again and it was you, I still was locoed. Never thought Johnny Gillette from the 76 would feel like you do to'rds Pike Lusk's daughter—not when there's Alma Kavanaugh—"

"They ain't in the same class," interrupted Johnny in a low growl. "You talk too much without sayin' anything. Who shot you?"

A cunning grin spread on Pete Lusk's red-whiskered face. "That," he said, "is my business. And it ain't finished. I'll tend to it before I quit the country."

BRIDGET came with the pail of water and a clean shirt. Pete told her it was whiskey he needed—some hot grub, a few hours sleep, and then a fresh horse. He was surly and would have cussed his sister if Johnny hadn't been there.

"You made your talk," Pete Lusk told Johnny when his sister had gone back to the cabin to fetch the jug of corn whiskey, "and I'm holdin' you to it. Git Biddy away from here, right now. Take her to the Seventy Six; she ain't safe here. And neither are you.

"Biddy and I," said Johnny Gillette, "are pullin' out right after supper. Like you said, she won't be safe here. And you're tough enough to take your own part. I'll leave Biddy with my dad. Then I'll be back. Right now Biddy's safety means a damn sight more to me than your renegade hide. One thing, though. You run into Tubac Jones anywhere along your trail?"

Pete Lusk shook his head. "No. And I don't want to. Where's Pike?"

"In jail at Nogales—on the Mexican side. But he should be out by now and on his way home. I made a deal with Pike. Pike's splittin' the blankets with the Kavanaugh outfit."

"Pike's all right, Johnny. The old man never throwed in too strong with Kate and Burt and Hurley. Me, I went deep—too deep to ever wade back out. Those double-crossin' sons!"

"Don't deal out Purty Caid when you're cussin' that outfit, Pete."

"Purty Caid and the Kavanaugh boys is somethin'. Really somethin'!" Pete Lusk pulled on his shirt. "They're playin' for keeps, and no holts barred. Git Biddy away from here, pronto. And don't come back by moonlight—wait till daybreak. Then, fetch your Seventy Six cowhands along, and Tubac Jones and his Rangers, too. You'll still be short-handed, when you tackle that Kavanaugh outfit. And when Alma Kavanaugh smiles her purtiest, that's when you better git your guard up. Her eyes lie and her lips lie. And she's takin' her orders straight from Aunt Kate. . . .

"There's two dead cowhands out yonder on the desert tonight—two border jumpers that won't never worry Tubac Jones and his Rangers no more. They'd been ridin' along, drinkin' from the bottle Burt or Hurley handed us—countin' the money Caid Wilcox had paid over at the Mesquite Springs where we camped till the cool of the day. Then hell busted loose, and they both got it—in the back."

Pete Lusk laughed harshly. He was on his feet now, standing with stocky, thick-bowed legs braced. "They double-crossed us, Johnny," he went on. "Three of us was supposed to share the profits with Burt and Hurley Kavanaugh on them stolen cattle when we delivered 'em on that range around Mesquite Springs that Caid Wilcox has leased. Caid was payin' in cash for them stolen Mexican cattle, and we'd each bought us soft leather money belts down in Mexico. We'd been joshin' one another about how we'd fill the pouches of them belts when Caid Wilcox paid off—me and Tom Fox and Slim Smith, that worked for the Seventy-Six till you ketched 'em stealin' cattle from your iron and fired 'em. Then Purty Caid hired 'em back on the sly and sent 'em over to work with me'n Pike. . . . And we was stuffin' our pay-off money in them new belts and nibblin' at the bottle Hurley had pulled, when Hurley and Burt Kavanaugh dropped a little behind.

"Then they let us have it. My horse musta spooked because their first shot just grazed

me. But then this bullet in the shoulder musta knocked me cold. When I come to it was dark, but I wasn't as dead as Tom Fox and Shorty Smith! But I was just as broke. Our money was gone. Burt and Hurley had got shore greedy—or mebbyso they was just carryin' out Aunt Kate's orders, the double crossin', murderin' sons!"

"Where does Alma take chips in this game?" asked Johnny Gillette.

"If you got the brains I'm commencin' to think you got, Johnny, you know the answer to that 'un," replied Pete. "Alma is Aunt Kate's decoy. Us cowhands gather around her like flies around a honey pot. But Alma Kavanaugh won't say 'yes' to any man. Her eyes keep tellin' you, 'Mebby, some day' and her smile coaxes a feller and teases him on till he's half locoed with wild hopin'. And you'd steal or kill because you're drunk on that kind of damned fool hopin'. . . ."

JOHNNY GILLETTE nodded, his grin flat-lipped. He'd been one of those flies buzzing around the honey pot, and the only one Aunt Kate Kavanaugh actually had branded with her iron of approval. And he remembered now what Alma had told him.

"When the right man I want comes along, Johnny," she had told him frankly, "I won't play him like a trout. He'll know it. But he won't be somebody Aunt Kate has picked. She can't sell me to the highest bidder like I'm a prize filly. I'll choose my own man. And it'll be for keeps. I don't want you and your Seventy-Six outfit, Johnny. So take it easy."

"Stealin' and killin'," Johnny nodded at Pete Lusk. "That goes for Caid Wilcox, too."

"And it goes double for Purty Caid." Pete fished in the pocket of his blood-spattered Levis and pulled out a couple of crumpled banknotes. He handed one to Johnny, a twenty dollar bill.

"All I got left," he said, "from another bunch of dogies we peddled to Purty Caid Wilcox last month. Tubac Jones won a couple, three hundred off me at stud. I was drunk or I'd kept the money in my pocket like Purty Caid warned me to. The money come from that train hold-up in Nevada six months ago."

"You wasn't mixed up in that, Pete!"

"Hell, no. But where was Purty Caid about the time them three fellers stuck up that train and rode away with fifty-sixty thousand dollars? And where was Burt and Hurley Kavanaugh the night of the train robbery? And why did Aunt Kate Kavanaugh give Burt and Hurley orders to kill off me and Tom Fox and Slim Smith if Caid Wilcox paid us off in that dangerous money? And why did Aunt Kate offer to pay me dollar for dollar and no discount for any of that Nevada money I had from Caid Wilcox's last pay-off? Was it because Caid, as Kate Kavanaugh claimed, had got a-holt of some of that Nevada money *by mistake?*"

Biddy showed up with the whiskey and Pete drank the potent corn likker as a thirsty man drinks cool water.

"Tubac Jones know what kind of money that was, Pete?"

Pete gave him a red-whiskered grin. "I tried to buy it back when I sobered up. Tubac said to tuck in my shirt tail and keep my trap shut and I might stay clear of the pen. And what money was I talkin' about, anyhow."

"And Tubac Jones rode from here to Buzzard Well, Biddy?" Johnny asked, and Bridget Lusk nodded.

"Saddle a fresh horse, Biddy," Johnny Gillette made a swift decision, "and pull out for the Seventy Six Ranch. Tell that dad of mine you've moved in to stay, and for him to send what cowpunchers he's got handy to Buzzard Well—with saddle guns. Me'n Pete are ridin' over there to Buzzard Well."

Johnny rode down Pete's protests. Biddy could take care of herself on that ride to the 76 Ranch. And Tubac Jones, captain of the Arizona Rangers, could use Pete and Johnny before long. And they could use Tubac Jones. The big jackpot was open. They had to make their bets and play their cards—pronto.

CHAPTER THREE

The Trap Snaps Shut!

BACK at Buzzard Well, Tubac Jones sat with his back against the wall and played poker with Kate Kavanaugh and Burt and Hurley. Alma served them drinks, and between rounds would step outside to look around. Each time she came back she answered the question in Kate Kavanaugh's eyes with a shake of her head.

Burt and Hurley Kavanaugh had been half drunk when they got to Buzzard Well. And though a big bait of hot grub had sobered them to some extent, they were now getting another start. They were feeling good, but under their rough joshing and behind their grins was an ugly cross current that only Aunt Kate's hard eyes could control.

Tubac now and then cut Alma a quick look, and when her eyes would meet his, she would smile softly. He wondered why Alma Kavanaugh was watering his whiskey when she poured their drinks at the bar. He strung along with her game, whatever it was, by pretending to get gradually drunk.

Occasionally Apache Rose would appear in the doorway, her black eyes watching Tubac Jones with a disconcerting intensity.

"Whiskey," Apache Rose would grunt. And Alma would give the squaw watered whiskey.

"Did you ever tell Burt and Hurley," Tubac Jones asked Kate Kavanaugh tipsily, "how their daddy, Jack Kavanaugh, got killed? That it was a fair gun fight—neither me or Jack havin' the bulge?"

"You killed Jack Kavanaugh," answered Kate flatly. "What does it matter how you did the job?"

"No matter," said the Ranger, "so far as Burt and Hurley are concerned. But I'd hate for Alma to think I'd killed her father without givin' him a fightin' chance for his taw."

"You killed Jack Kavanaugh," said Kate, who was banking the poker game. "You killed him, and then you and Tom Gillette went and took his ranch away from the dead man's three kids."

"And gave you Buzzard Well in trade," replied Tubac coolly, "and a fair trade it was, Kate. We didn't want his three kids starvin' to death. And because you was a woman we didn't want to send you to the pen at Yuma. Tom Gillette even offered to adopt Alma, but you fought that notion like a wildcat. Said you'd raise Jack Kavanaugh's three orphaned kids accordin' to your own lights. Which you shore done." And he grinned at her flatly across the big, cloth-covered poker table.

"Are we playing poker," smiled Kate Kavanaugh, "or just exchanging gossip?"

"Did you ever tell Burt and Hurley," asked Tubac Jones smoothly, "or Alma, that you hated your brother Jack's guts?"

"That's a lie, Tubac!" Kate Kavanaugh's even voice lifted dangerously.

"I'll put it different, then, Kate. You had a kind of contempt for your twin brother Jack. Because he should have bin the girl, and you shoulda bin born the boy. You had guts and brains, but Jack was a weaklin'. So you cracked the whip and your brother Jack jumped. So when me'n Tom Gillette got you roped, throwed and hogtied, it wasn't too much work wipin' out Jack Kavanaugh and his renegades."

"If I'd been there," Kate Kavanaugh flared into swift fury, "it would have been a different story, Tubac! Tom Gillette wouldn't be alive, and neither would you. But you caught me in your wolf trap and had me locked in jail, damn' you!"

Tubac Jones cut Alma another quick look. She had been listening there behind the bar and now she gave Tubac a faint answering smile.

"Jack Kavanaugh was cussin' your name when he died, Kate," Tubac Jones went on relentlessly. "Jack's bin dead ten-twelve years, but he's still a-cussin' you, down there in Hell. And if you don't want my word for it, take a

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good look at Burt and Hurley. They're reppin' for their daddy in Hell. And through them, his two renegade sons, he's still a-cussin' you, Kate. And you're givin' them two renegade sons of his the same kind of deal you always give Jack Kavanaugh. Shore one big happy family you got here at Buzzard Well, Kate!"

THEY were all glaring hard at Tubac Jones now. What sounded like his whiskey talk had stirred them up; and while Kate's hard gray eyes held her pair of tough nephews like a drawn gun, they slid furtive glances at one another. Thus their guilt was betrayed. And while it came with no shock of surprise to her, Kate Kavanaugh hated to have the family's split-up dragged out into the open and kicked around by this new Captain of the Arizona Rangers. She lived in constant dread of open mutiny here, and her somber black dress had pockets that always held a pair of .38 six-shooters. Burt and Hurley had been getting too cocky lately—as if they had a secret deal of some kind cooking. And she, Kate, suspected that Caid Wilcox was behind it. Kate had told Purty Caid to leave Alma alone, keep his hands off. She'd told him that she'd hate to have to kill a useful man, but that if necessary she could replace Caid at any time. She was marrying Alma to Johnnie Gillette, she'd declared. Caid Wilcox had taken it too smoothly to suit Kate. Caid Wilcox was treacherous and tricky, and she had never dared abuse him the way she did her two tough nephews.

Tonight, Kate Kavanaugh was uneasy. Things had been going wrong, not badly wrong, but enough to cause her worry. For one thing, Caid had not turned in his cut of the Navada train robbery money. He'd been careless, too, and had got some of it mixed up with money he'd paid Pete Lusk for Mexican cattle. And when she'd tried to get the money away from Pete, that drunken red-headed fool had been about three hundred dollars short, claiming he'd gotten drunk and lost some of the dangerous money in a poker game at Nogales. And now Tubac Jones had showed up with some of that money, boldly pushing it at her like a challenge.

Burt and Hurley had obeyed her orders, they swore to her. When Caid Wilcox had carried out his swaggering threat to pay off Pete Lusk, Tom Fox and Slim Smith with that Nevada dinero, Kate Kavanaugh had given Burt and Hurley their orders to kill those three and fetch the stolen money to her at Buzzard Well. And while Alma was in the saloon after supper keeping Tubac Jones entertained, Kate had called her two nephews and they had handed her three money belts.

"We killed them three," Hurley told her, "like you said."

"And here's the money, Aunt Kate," leered Burt. "We ain't even unsnapped the pockets of them three money belts."

"Where was Caid Wilcox when you did your chores?" she'd asked them.

"Camped alone at Mesquite Springs," answered Hurley. "Said he was headin' back for the 76 home ranch after dark, when it got cool. He was ten miles back there when we done the job. Caid don't even know they're dead."

"I never sighted Caid Wilcox once with the glasses." Kate Kavanaugh had voiced a thing that had worried her all day. "Not once could I pick him or his horse."

"It's brushy there at Mesquite Springs. And Caid Wilcox had his horse picketed. He never came out of the cabin," said Burt.

"Caid said," added Hurley, "that he didn't aim for anybody to sight him there at Mesquite Springs—that you could look through your field glasses till you went sun-blind, but you wouldn't ketch sight of him. Said you'd never be able to say you'd sighted Caid Wilcox there, and to tell you that when we got back to Buzzard Well."

So Caid Wilcox had played it foxy and kept out of sight. He wanted an alibi for himself, as if he'd suspected that Burt and Hurley were going to carry out a job of cold-blooded murder. And he, Caid, was keeping clear of it.

"Did either of you lame-brained drunks get mouthy and brag that you were collecting that money with your gun barrels?" asked Kate. "Did you hint to Purty Caid that you were going to kill Tom Fox and Slim Smith and Pete Lusk? Did you?" Her voice had cracked like a blacksnake bullwhip.

"Nary a word, Aunt Kate," declared Hurley. "You kin gamble on it."

"I wouldn't gamble a dollar of that Nevada paper on it!" asserted Kate Kavanaugh vehemently. "But let me catch the pair of you in a lie and I'll skin you both alive. Now get back to the saloon and keep your mouths shut and your hands off your guns. Tubac Jones didn't come here to make calf eyes at your sister. There's one man Alma can't fool. He says he's after Pete Lusk, and he's going to watch for the buzzards to take him to where he'll find his man. I don't like the way he said it. I've got to outsmart Tubac Jones some way," she added thoughtfully.

"We kin kill him off, Aunt Kate," bragged Burt Kavanaugh.

"It don't need to be a fair fight," added Hurley.

"You pair of boneheads keep forgetting," said Kate Kavanaugh, "that Tubac Jones is the new Captain of the Arizona Rangers and that Tom Gillette knows he was coming here. So does that brat of Pike Lusk's—in fact, she sent him here. If Tubac Jones don't ride away

from this place alive, the Rangers will swarm here like those buzzards will swarm out yonder tomorrow morning. Tubac Jones has got to be safe here. And he knows it."

"Then how you goin' to handle 'im, Aunt Kate?" asked Burt.

"I'd be a fool to tell you. And I'm no fool. Now get back to the saloon before he gets any information out of Alma. Though that'd be a job no man ever got done. If you two jugheads had any part of your sister's brains, you'd amount to something. But all the Kavanaugh men are sheep-brained—only the Kavanaugh women have brains and guts. Your sister Alma has both, but she can't dab her line on Tubac Jones. Tubac is woman-proof. I know."

AND Kate Kavanaugh had smiled; a bitter kind of smile, with memory darkening her eyes. She'd been old enough, twelve years ago, or nearly old enough, to have been Tubac's mother. But no man, young or old or in between, had ever been able to get out of Kate Kavanaugh's reach if she'd wanted him. She'd been younger looking then, and men had killed other men for her smiles. But young Tubac Jones had smiled and shaken his head and ridden away, and she had thought all the more of him for it—even as she now admired him for his coldness. Tubac Jones was *muy hombre*. Not even Alma could dent his armor.

So now they played poker at a round table in a far corner of the adobe saloon, while Alma tended bar and acted as lookout for Aunt Kate. From time to time, Apache Rose would appear, and would stare at Tubac Jones from the doorway, her black eyes wicked with hatred, grunting her sullen demand for another drink. Each time she was a little drunker. Meanwhile, Kate Kavanaugh, with the drunken cooperation of Burt and Hurley, matched a poker duel with Tubac Jones for that Nevada bank robbery money he had flashed on her.

Tubac Jones had eyed Kate with an almost amused look when she challenged him to the poker game. And she had smiled back at him, tight-lipped. They understood a lot about one another, this man and woman.

"Aimin' to add my bankroll to your Nevada collection, Kate?" grinned Tubac.

"*Quien sabe?* Who can tell, Tubac? It's politer this way, with cards, than sticking a gun in your belly."

"You mean my back, don't you, Kate? A stud game or a little draw poker helps pass the time while I'm waitin' for my man to show up. Or till I commence watchin' the buzzards in the mornin'. Stud or draw?" And he took a chair so placed that his back was to the wall.

And now his faked drunken baiting was throwing the poker game out of gear. Burt began one of his wild bluffing attacks that Tubac Jones had learned how to build up high before he called Burt's losing hand. And Hurley discarded what would have been the winning hand, to swill down more booze. Even Kate Kavanaugh, who played poker like a professional, was not playing her hand right. She let herself get sucked into the pot for fifty dollars before she realized what she was doing, then dropped out when Burt shoved a sheaf of new ten dollar bills—Nevada money—to the center of the table.

That was train robbery money, as dangerous to touch as high explosive. But Burt and Hurley had both gotten reckless and had produced that kind of money to sit into the game, sullen and defiant under the cold glare of their Aunt Kate's hard gray eyes.

Tubac had been winning. He matched Burt's bet and raised it and Burt was raising it again. Kate Kavanaugh tilted her handsome head a little sideways as if she might be listening for something or someone outside. Hurley filled his glass from the bottle Alma fetched.

Kate Kavanaugh cut Alma a meaning look and Alma nodded and headed for the door to take a look outside. But Apache Rose appeared in the doorway to block Alma's exit. There was a big curved bladed butcher knife in the squaw's hand.

"Whiskey," grunted the Apache squaw. Her black opaque eyes glittered redly in the smoke-laden lamplight. "More whiskey." The butcher knife motioned Alma back.

"You'd like to slide the sharp edge of that across my throat, wouldn't you, Rose, my pet?" Alma's voice hardened and the softness was gone from her red lips and pretty eyes. "One of these times you'll wake up from a knife jag and find yourself on that section of your Injun Happy Hunting Ground that us white-skinned folks call Hell."

But the sight of that whetted skinning knife made Alma Kavanaugh shudder as she would never flinch from a gun. She had a white person's fear of a knife. She disregarded her Aunt Kate's ruling never to give Apache Rose anything but watered whiskey, a small drink at a time. Ignoring Kate's warning stare, she came out from behind the bar with a full quart and took it to the squaw.

"Pull the cork on that, darling," smiled Alma, "and why don't you just stay out yonder on your own reservation?"

Apache Rose grabbed the bottle with her free hand and sent Alma shrinking back with a swift cutting flourish of the knife. And then Apache Rose backed out of the doorway. And where her tall, wide, full-skirted bulk had stood on moccasin feet, now stood Caid Wilcox.

A big six-shooter in Caid Wilcox's hand was pointed straight at Tubac Jones.

"Keep both hands on the table, Tubac!" Caid Wilcox's voice cracked like a whip. "One little wrong move and I'll let yuh have it."

Caid Wilcox was a six-footer with wide shoulders and lean flanks and belly, and his legs were a little saddle-bowed. His hair was coarse and straight and black, and he had a neatly trimmed black mustache with the points waxed. His tight-fitting whipcord pants were foxed with buckskin, and his pants legs shoved into the fancy stitched tops of very high-heeled boots. He was a little too fancy: A range dude.

"Purty Caid." Tubac spoke quietly and lifted both empty hands to the level of his shoulders. "I bin wonderin' when you'd show up to take chips in the game."

"Don't go runnin' off at the head, Tubac," snapped Caid Wilcox "when you should be just listenin'. . . . Burt, git the Ranger's guns. Hurley, help Burt hogtie him."

"A little high-handed, aren't you, Caid," said Kate Kavanaugh flatly, "for a hired man?"

Caid Wilcox's teeth bared in a mirthless grin. "Mebbyso. But most mebby you'd better let me ramrod this deal. Those nephews of yours did a sloppy job—they let Pete Lusk git away."

"That's a damned lie!" blurted Hurley. "Pete's so dead he stinks by now."

"Tend to Tubac Jones," barked Caid Wilcox. "Pete Lusk is a long ways from dead. Mebbyso Pete's bullet-proof. The job you done on Tom Fox and Shorty Smith was all right. But I follered the blood sign to Agua Caliente Ranch. Pete Lusk and Johnny Gillette are there makin' war medicine. The fat's in the fire plenty."

TUBAC JONES had to let Burt and Hurley take his six-shooter and the .38 sneak gun he packed in a shoulder holster under his shirt. They handled him roughly as they tied his wrists together behind his back. Then Burt tripped him from behind as Hurley hit him hard with a vicious open-handed swing that spurted blood from Tubac's nose. And as he staggered backwards and went down, Burt kicked him savagely in the belly. They would have kept on kicking Tubac Jones if Kate Kavanaugh had not called them off.

"Quit it, you pair of drunken, yellow-bellied cowards!" she shouted at them. "Scared to death of him till you had him tied. Let him alone or I'll horsewhip the mangy, stinking pair of you."

"Put Tubac Jones on his horse, boys," snapped Caid Wilcox. "Take him out where you murdered Tom Fox and Shorty Smith, and don't louse up this job like you did on Pete Lusk."

"Stand your hands!" Kate Kavanaugh glared at her two nephews. "You Burt, and you Hurley. Don't do Purty Caid's dirty work for him, you drunken fools. Tubac Jones is the Ranger Captain. His men will show up here, looking for him. You want to both hang from the same gallows?"

Burt and Hurley looked at Caid Wilcox uncertainly.

Tubac Jones had gotten to his feet and stood with his back braced against the wall, blood spilling from his nose. But he was grinning faintly, and his puckered blue eyes watched Kate.

This was a show-down, now, between Kate Kavanaugh and Caid Wilcox.

"Turn Tubac Jones loose, you pair of sheep-brained idiots!" Kate had turned her back on Caid Wilcox to stare down her two nephews.

But Burt shook his head, and Hurley, brave from too much whiskey, put it into words.

"Me'n Burt ain't takin' no more of your damned abuse, Aunt Kate. We're free, white and of age. We're men, not—"

.."*Men!*" Kate spat the word at them, then took a step towards Tubac Jones to untie his hands.

Caid Wilcox moved now with a cougar's speed and treachery as Kate Kavanaugh made the mistake of turning her back on him. The barrel of his six-shooter lifted, came down in a short, chopping blow, just as Tubac called out to her, too late.

Kate Kavanaugh's head sagged limply, and her black satin dress rustled softly as she went down.

Alma gave a sharp, choked cry. Then Apache Rose was behind Alma and the curved knife blade glinted. Tubac Jones' hands were tied behind his back but he could still use his legs and feet. He kicked the knife from the squaw's hand, then crashed into her big bulk. Apache Rose staggered backwards, off balance, and went down with a heavy thud.

Caid Wilcox's face looked a little pale as he took Alma's arm. He cursed the Indian woman in a mixture of whiteman's profanity and Apache insults as the squaw picked up the knife and went out the door.

"You ain't goin' to take Kate's part, Alma!" Caid Wilcox's voice was low-toned, threatening. "Hell, I've set you and Burt and Hurley free of her damned abuse. . . And now I'm ramroddin' this outfit. You understand that, Alma?" And he tightened his grip on her shoulder, holding her close to him.

"I understand." Alma's face was drained of color and even her lips looked pale and something like fear darkened her eyes. She cut Tubac Jones a swift glance, and he shook his head, his blue eyes hard with warning.

Alma forced a smile and looked up at Caid Wilcox. "I understand. You're the boss, Caid. But you're hurting my shoulder. Please, Caid!"

Caid grinned, then gave Burt and Hurley their further orders.

"Kate's just knocked out," he told them. "Tie her up and lock her and Tubac Jones in the dugout. Apache Rose will stand guard. Move, damn it! Hell, you ain't scared of your Aunt Kate now, are yuh?"

Hurley grabbed a quick drink, a big drink, then tied his Aunt Kate's hands behind her, Burt helping clumsily. Both of them were plainly afraid the woman would come to before they got the job done.

"I wish to hell," muttered Burt, "you'd a-killed her while you was at it, Caid."

"I won't shed no tears, boys," Caid Wilcox told the two brothers, "if you finish the job on Kate. We might have to do it, sooner or later. Why don't you boys just finish her and the Ranger off? Cover their carcasses in the dugout. You kin cave the dirt at the back in on 'em. . . ."

"No!" Alma's voice was husky, taut. "Burt! Hurley! Don't do a thing like that! Don't murder your own aunt. And this ain't the time or the place to kill Tubac Jones." And she looked up at Caid Wilcox.

"You know that, Caid. Don't make a mistake that you can't cover up. Use that purty head of yours."

THE color was coming back into her pale cheeks and lips. She'd seen Kate Kavanaugh open her eyes, then close them again before they noticed. Alma took hold of Caid's left arm and stroked it in a coaxing, intimate gesture.

"We have to live on here, Caid. Don't make any mistakes that you might be sorry for later on."

"Here, hell!" Caid grinned down at her. "We'll be livin' in the big house at the 76 Ranch, honey. . . . All right, boys. Lock up the prisoners and put Apache Rose on guard. Then high-tail it back here. Johnny Gillette and Pete Lusk will be ridin' up before long—ridin' right into our gun trap. We got to set it good."

Caid Wilcox led Alma towards the bar. She slid free of his arm with a soft smile and went in around behind the bar and set Caid out a clean glass and a new bottle of Kate Kavanaugh's bonded whiskey.

"Best in the house, Caid," she said. "It's from Aunt Kate's private stock. Nothing's too good for Purty Caid—the new ramrod at Buzzard Well."

"And I'll drink to the new queen of the big Seventy-Six," Purty Caid said. "Ain't I promised you I'd come out on top of the heap?"

"There's still Pete Lusk and Johnny Gillette to tally off, Caid—and Old Man Tom Gillette and Pike Lusk. Don't count your hides till they're hung on the fence, handsome."

"Pete Lusk and Johnny Gillete are on their way. I'll punch their one-way tickets to hell. And if they let Pike Lusk outa jail, Burt and Hurley kin dry-gulch that old son. It'll give me personal pleasure to kill Old Man Tom. He got too smart for his britches when he sent his Ranger Captain Tubac Jones to hamstring me. That right, Tubac?"

Burt and Hurley had to carry their Aunt Kate's limp black satin weight to the dugout. And now they'd come back, sweating, a little winded, for Tubac Jones, whom they'd thrown into one of the big barroom armchairs.

Tubac spat blood. "Sounds like dangerous talk to me, Wilcox."

"You'll never live long enough to repeat it, Ranger."

"A man ain't dead," said Tubac, "till he dies." His faded blue eyes puckered as he looked at Alma, then at Caid Wilcox. "You talk big, Caid," he added. "You cook up a shore big mess of plans—mebby too big for one man to handle. Even if you kill me'n

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Kate and Pete and Pike Lusk and Johnny and Old Man Tom Gillette, you still got a mess on your hands. You'll have Burt and Hurley to ride close herd on. And that daughter of Pike Lusk's will be a burr under your saddle blanket. And there'll be some tall explainin' to do to the Arizona Rangers."

"I'll ramrod that, mister." Caid Wilcox grinned and downed his drink. "And I'll have Alma helpin' me. She's got brains like her Aunt Kate. Like Kate claims, all the Kavanaugh brains and guts went to the women."

Tubac nodded. "Kate's right—that's just what I'm gittin' at. Your Injun squaw mother ever tell you who your real father was, Caid?"

"What do you mean, my Injun squaw mother? My real father?" Purty Caid's bloodshot eyes narrowed.

"Apache Rose is your mother. You know that, even if nobody else, mebby not even Kate Kavanaugh, ever guessed it. It was a secret between your squaw mother and you. Apache Rose has bin plannin' it since you was born at a little cow town called Wilcox and they called you Caid Wilcox for a name. And even I would never have guessed it if I hadn't had the knack of pickin' up languages like Mexican and Yaqui and Apache. And when I killed Jack Kavanaugh, and Apache Rose went on a wild killin' spree and come at me with a meat cleaver and a butcher knife, she was talkin' shore wicked in her Apache language. And you know why she was drunk and on the warpath? Because I'd killed the father of her only child. I'd killed Jack Kavanaugh. Apache Rose was Jack Kavanaugh's squaw!"

Purty Caid's jaw slacked. His feverish eyes stared at Tubac Jones. He looked like a man whose wind had been kicked out.

"That's a damned lie!" he blurted hotly.

"No," said Tubac Jones quietly, "I'm tellin' the truth. You're Jack Kavanaugh's half-breed son and that makes you a half-brother to Burt and Hurley here. And that's why I figger mebbyso you got weak brains, like all the Kavanaugh men. . . . That's why, too, you can't git married to Alma Kavanaugh here—because she's your half sister. Apache Rose was goin' to kill her and mebbyso that was one of her squaw reasons. Don't take my word for it—there stands your mother in the doorway. She's bin listenin' outside. And she savvies white man's talk a hell of a lot better than ever she's let on. Ask your squaw mother if I'm lyin', Purty Caid!"

"He don't lie." Apache Rose spoke sullenly. "Your name is Caid Kavanaugh. Jack Kavanaugh your father. Kate Kavanaugh knows; I tell her when I come here to live. Jack Kavanaugh married white woman. That's all right. I don't talk. He tell me he kill me if I talk. He got kids by that white woman. That white wife he's got works me hard. I am a squaw. Squaws don't count. She's got yellow hair, like that Alma. She's tall. She don't get fat. One night I get drunk. She quirt me and call me a drunk squaw. So I cut her throat, bury her and hide the grave. I look after them three kids. My boy works for the Seventy-Six. He got job there. Caid Wilcox. Good job, white man's job. Nobody know he's half-breed. Nobody but me and Jack Kavanaugh and Kate Kavanaugh.

"Kate Kavanaugh don't ask me where I bury that white woman. She don't say nothing. She just say that woman no good. Better dead. Keep my mouth shut. Some day we use my son Caid. Caid will help get that Seventy-Six outfit. Tell Jack Kavanaugh that white wife die from snake bite.

"Then Jack Kavanaugh get killed. That Tubac Jones kill him. So I think mebby I kill that Tubac Jones because he kill my man. Now my Caid can kill that Tubac Jones. . . ."

APACHE ROSE was gone from the doorway, and there was an ugly tense silence in the saloon. They were all staring at the black, empty doorway—all but Alma Kavanaugh.

Alma had reached under the bar when the squaw had appeared there in the doorway. And now her hand came up gripping a double-barreled sawed-off shotgun.

Tubac Jones was watching her covertly. He smiled thinly as she thumbed back the twin hammers. And when Purty Caid whirled around at the ominous sound of the clicking gun hammers, he was staring into the two round holes of the double barreled shotgun.

"Aunt Kate," said Alma Kavanaugh quietly, "is the only mother I've ever known. You move the wrong way, Purty Caid, and you'll get your fancy head blown off. And the other barrel I'll leave for that pair of mangy coyotes I'm ashamed to claim for brothers. Blood is supposed to be thicker than water, but Kavanaugh blood is bad blood. . . . Rattle your hocks, Tubac! Come around behind the bar and I'll cut your hands free. Then you can take the deal."

Tubac Jones never moved faster in his life. And when he had come in behind the bar Alma rested the sawed-off shotgun on the bar, its twin barrels covering Caid and Burt and Hurley. Alma was smiling faintly but her eyes looked almost black. And they were no longer soft; they were as dangerous as her Aunt Kate's as she groped with her left hand and found the slim-bladed bar knife. Then with its whetted blade, she cut the hogging string binding Tubac Jones' wrists.

He took the sawed-off shotgun, then almost pulled both triggers as Alma Kavanaugh kissed him hard on one leathery cheek.

"You hadn't oughta do a thing like that, Alma," he grinned at her, "when a man's got a cocked scattergun in his hands."

"Had to claim you while I had the chance," said Alma. "That puts you strictly in my iron, mister. From what Aunt Kate tells me, you've run a maverick too long. Hold 'em here, all three of 'em, while I go to Aunt Kate. But don't shoot unless you have to. Aunt Kate's still banking this game, Ranger."

Alma Kavanaugh picked up Tubac Jones's six-shooter and .38 hide-out gun and fetched them to him behind the bar. He put down the sawed-off shotgun and took his six-shooter and the short-barreled .38.

Alma Kavanaugh picked up the sawed-off shotgun and broke it. Then she smiled across the bar at Purty Caid.

"Just as I thought," she laughed softly. "Empty! Kate took the cartridges out this morning, because Apache Rose had started hitting the brooze. Anyhow, the bluff worked. . . . How about borrowing that smaller gun of yours, Tubac?"

Tubac Jones never took his eyes off Caid and Burt and Hurley. He laid the .38 on the bar and Alma picked it up.

"It's yours now, Alma," he told her. "Keep it. And fetch Kate."

Alma Kavanaugh nodded, and as she went out Caid Kavanaugh cursed her, his lips twisted, teeth bared like a snarling cougar. Burt and Hurley watched her go with sullen, hate-glazed eyes.

"No ladies present now," said Tubac Jones flatly, "so if you three mongrel Kavanaughs feel lucky, fill your gun hands."

"Not while you got us covered," snarled Caid. "Don't let him crowd you into it, boys. Tubac Jones is a killer. Damn that Alma for a damned double-crossin' traitor to her own kind."

Tubac Jones eyed Purty Caid bleakly, and motioned towards the money that still lay on the cloth-covered poker table, just as the bets had been made.

"You and Burt and Hurley held up that Nevada train, Caid," he said. "That's some of the money you used to pay Tom Fox and Shorty Smith and Pete Lusk. Want to claim it?"

"Aunt Kate Kavanaugh ramrodded that deal," said Caid. "Me'n Burt and Hurley just done the work. Kate took a fifty percent cut, then tried to deal me out with a third cut of the other fifty percent. Expected me to hang onto that money till it hatched young. So I told her that unless she paid me two dollars for one, I'd put that Nevada money into circulation—and I wasn't bluffin'. I paid Tom Fox and Shorty Smith and Pete Lusk off in stolen money for my share of the cattle.

"Me'n Kate is pardners in the Mexican cattle Pete and Tom and Shorty fetched outa Mexico. Kate sent Burt and Hurley along with Pete Lusk into Mexico to gather and hold her share. So she give Burt and Hurley orders to collect the money while they was reppin' for her KK iron. They collected and I cold trailed 'em and found Tom Fox and Shorty Smith dead—shot in the back. They didn't do such a good job on Pete Lusk. I'm tellin' you because you're the Jawn Law here, Tubac. And unless Burt and Hurley want to hang fer murder, they better side me from here on. You ain't holdin' the winnin' hand for the big jackpot, Tubac. What you're a-holdin' is a bobtailed flush. ... You, Burt, and Hurley! Git set to play your strings out."

Purty Caid's lips twisted in a snarl and his bloodshot eyes glittered as they watched Tubac Jones behind the pine board bar. Then his voice cracked like a whiplash.

"Pronto! *Rose!*"

From outside, where the moonlight and black shadows mottled the night, a rifle cracked. Its aim was good. A bullet shattered the only light in the saloon, a big glass hanging lamp, above the poker table.

Then hell tore loose. The saloon, plunged into sudden darkness, was filled by the heavy explosions of .45 six-shooters. The blackness filled with the acrid fumes of burnt gunpowder. Purty Caid had thrown himself to one side and flat on the floor, Tubac's instant bullet creasing his shoulder.

Then Tubac Jones was crouched behind the bar, holding his fire, cussing himself for not killing Purty Caid when he had the bulge. And now Caid and his Apache squaw mother had outfoxed him and Caid and Burt and Hurley were riddling the front of the bar with six-shooter fire. Tubac felt the pine splinters stabbing his face as bullets droned past his ears like deadly hornets. He dropped to his belly and crawled towards the end of the bar and around it.

CHAPTER FOUR

Hell at Buzzard Well

FROM outside, threading clearly through the din of gunfire inside the saloon, sounded the voice of Alma Kavanaugh.

"You killed Aunt Kate! You filthy, stinking, gut-eating squaw! You cut Aunt Kate's throat—killed her like you killed my mother! Take a big drink of that rotgut booze, Apache Rose—you'll need it!"

Simultaneously came the crack of the rifle Apache Rose had stolen from the high lookout. The sound was followed by the swift

rapid fire of the short-barreled .38 pistol Tubac Jones had given Alma. Apache Rose screamed crazily. Then her horrible scream choked off into a death rattle.

The shooting inside the saloon had slacked into echoing silence. Tubac Jones heard Purty Caid cursing thickly; and then from out in the night came the pounding of shod hoofs. A man's voice barked, "What the hell goes on here?"

"Hold your fire, Johnny Gillette!" yelled Tubac Jones. "You wouldn't shoot Alma, would you, Johnny? That you, Pete? Take it easy! Who's that with you? Oh, you, Pike. Well, welcome to Buzzard Well. Light and rest your saddles!"

"Who's doin' all the shootin'? Where's Burt and Hurley? Where's Tubac?" That was Johnny Gillette's voice—hard-edged, dangerous.

"Inside!" someone answered. "Purty Caid and Burt and Hurley. Inside the saloon. And the Devil in Hell have mercy on 'em if they've killed Tubac Jones. I'll kill 'em like I'd kill three rattlers."

"You bin hittin' the bottle, Alma?" There was a dry chuckle in the whiskey voice of tough old Pike Lusk.

"Wrong guess, Pike! I'm drunk on what the sissies call love."

"Purty Caid?" rasped Pete Lusk.

"Tubac Jones! And now quit yellin' at a lady and pull up the slack in your paws. Didn't you ever see a dead squaw before? Git in there and make a little music with those guns."

"You sound," chuckled the grizzled Pike Lusk, "like your Aunt Kate!"

Pike Lusk went into the abode saloon at a crouched run. Guns blazed and old Pike staggered. His six-shooter spat flame as he went down. And then Pete Lusk gave Johnny Gillette a sideway shove that threw him out of the line of gunfire and charged into the black saloon. He tripped over the bullet-riddled body of his father and fell, rolling over and over until his shoulders collided with the bar. Then he shot at the gun flashes over in the corner where Burt and Hurley were crouched behind the overturned poker table.

Hurley let out a wild, hoarse scream of agony and Pete Lusk shot at the threshing, pain-twisted Hurley and hit his target. Then Pete's gun flame drew Burt's fire, and they were swapping shots when Johnny Gillette dove in through the open doorway.

Purty Caid had been holding his fire. Cold sweat bathed him and in the darkness his eyes glittered like those of a trapped cougar. And in that brief instant when he could recognize Johnny Gillette in the doorway, silhouetted by the moonlit sky, Purty Caid squeezed his gun trigger.

Johnny felt the burning, stabbing pain, hot as a branding iron, hit his left shoulder as he dove low. He lost his balance and pitched headlong. As he rolled over and back onto his feet his left hand felt the top edge of the bar. He vaulted over and behind it—and landed almost on top of Tubac Jones.

The cold-nerved Arizona Ranger captain must have recognized Johnny by some sort of instinct. He gripped Johnny's gun arm, pitched his voice to an urgent whisper.

"Hold it, Johnny! I'm Tubac!"

From the far corner came a sudden gurgling sound. Burt Kavanaugh had found a bottle and the potent moonshine corn whiskey was heating his chilled guts and setting fire to his killer's brain. The stuff had killed the fear in him and now he was snarling and cursing, and perhaps for the first time in his life the lanky, rawboned Burt was actually dangerous as a gun fighter. Nothing short of killing was going to stop tough Burt Kavanaugh now.

Tubac Jones recognized the ugly symptoms. Jack Kavanaugh had gone whiskey-locoed like that ten, twelve years back. And he, too, had died hard and tough.

"Stay here, Johnny," Tubac whispered tensely. "Watch where I'm pointin' your gun arm. Git it? Purty Caid's right there. In the corner near the door—crouched for a fast get-away. Watch 'im. Hold your fire till Purty tries for his fade-away, then stop 'im with everything you got. . . . I'm goin' after Burt."

TUBAC was gone before Johnny Gillette could say a word. And when Burt Kavanaugh came out from behind the overturned poker table he had his own gun and Hurley's gun. He kicked the big table aside with a heavy crash. His voice was a maniacal bellow, and then both his guns were blazing.

Tubac Jones was standing crouched in the blackness at the end of the bar. The Ranger captain's six-shooter went into action and his first shot was a lucky hit that must have caught big Burt somewhere in a vital spot. Burt let out a crazed yell and started staggering around, his guns blasting indiscriminately. Every few seconds Tubac Jones would shoot again, and each shot came from a new spot in the darkness. And every time he pulled his gun trigger, Tubac hit his man.

It was hard for Johnny Gillette to obey the Ranger Captain's orders. The handle of his gun was wet in his sweaty grip. He had to force himself to keep his eyes glued on that corner where Tubac Jones had told him Purty Caid was crouched. Now and then one of Burt's wild bullets would crash through the bar so close to Johnny's head that he had to duck.

Out in the middle of the floor, Burt had

finally gone down with a heavy crash, but was still threshing around like a rattlesnake with its head shot off.

It must have snapped the taut nerves of Purty Caid. Jack Kavanaugh's half-breed son, son of Apache Rose, with more guts and brains than his white half-brothers, had quit his dark corner and was edging along the black wall towards the open doorway, where the moonlight came filtering in. And in spite of his cunning caution, Caid made little scuffling sounds in the smoke-filled darkness. Not more than a dozen feet away, gun cocked in his sweat-moistened hand, Johnny Gillette watched and listened with every nerve in his body tight as stretched wire.

Then he could see Purty Caid crouched against the wall beside the door, tensed, ready to leap through the moonlit opening.

Purty Caid made a perfect target, but Johnny couldn't pull his gun trigger. In spite of the Ranger Captain's orders, he couldn't kill a man in cold blood.

"It's me'n you, Caid!" called Johnny Gillette. He was on his feet as he spoke. "Let's go!"

The guns cracked at almost the same second, so that the two explosions sounded like one heavy roar. Caid's bullet nicked Johnny's ear. Johnny dropped to a crouch and kept shooting. Now Purty Caid's bullets were plowing into the pine board floor around Johnny's feet. But Johnny kept shooting even after Caid had pitched over onto his head and one shoulder, and his last bullet tore through Caid's black-haired head and tore away the side of his cheekbone and jaw.

It was all over.

And then from outside came the voice of Alma Kavanaugh, challenging somebody.

"*Quien es?* Pull up or I'll shoot!"

"Bridget Lusk. Biddy. And this ain't a hick'ry stick I'm holdin'. Don't think *I* shoot to miss, either."

"Hey, there!" bellowed a big voice. "You two she-wildcats put up them guns. What the hell! We're some Rangers, Alma! Come to pay your Aunt Kate Kavanaugh a little call."

"You got here a little late," said Alma Kavanaugh, "to hurt Aunt Kate. She's dead."

Ranger Captain Tubac Jones came out of the adobe saloon.

"Get in there, men," he said quietly, "and kinda mop up. You got another lamp, Alma?"

They all stared, slack-jawed, as Alma Kavanaugh gave a husky little laugh and dropped her gun and threw her arms around the leathery neck of Tubac Jones. And Tubac Jones, known throughout the cow country as a woman-hater, had his arms around Kate Kavanaugh's niece Alma and kissed her hard, almost savagely, on her mouth.

"You boys kin come to the weddin'," Ranger Captain Tubac Jones told his half-dozen cowpuncher Rangers. "And if there's a bottle in yonder that ain't bullet-smashed, you kin save me'n Johnny a snort."

JOHNNY GILLETTE came out through the door of the dark, smoke-filled saloon. He walked over to where Bridget Lusk sat her horse and lifted her from her saddle and held her close in his arms and rumpled her curly red hair.

Then Johnny's voice sounded in her ear.

"Your father and brother Pete are dead, Biddy. And no matter how ornery they were, they died like brave men. We talked on the way here, after Pike showed up and throwed in with me'n Pete. I promised 'em both that me'n Old Man Tom would keep the Law off their backs, give 'em a clean start. And we shook hands on it. . . . Pike saved my life when he charged in there first to fight it out with the Kavanaughs. Then Pete shoved me outa the way and beat me inside. We'll remember how they died—forget the rest."

Biddy Lusk blinked the tears from her eyes and smiled up at him.

"You're all that counts to me now, Johnny. I said a kind of a prayer, and God sure answered it for me."

Then Alma came over and took Biddy in her arms and they clung to one another in their grief, and in a newly discovered happiness that drove the ache from their hearts.

In the early dawn they dug graves and wrapped the dead bodies of Burt and Hurley Kavanaugh in their bed tarps and buried them there. They buried Purty Caid in a grave alongside his Apache squaw mother.

They put Kate Kavanaugh's satin-clad dead body in a pine board coffin and carried her up the steep trail to the lookout point at Buzzard Well. There, they piled big granite boulders on her grave for a fitting monument.

Then Tubac Jones and Alma and Johnny Gillette and Bridget rode away from Buzzard Well, headed for the big Seventy-Six.

And so Old Man Tom Gillette, sitting in his big leather chair at the Seventy-Six home ranch, watched four riders take shape as they came near. And then he called to his Chinaman cook to fetch drinks.

"There's a case of fancy champagne in the cellar!" Old Man Tom Gillette's voice crackled with excitement. "Chill it in the spring-house, and then put on a clean white jacket and go bake a cake. Sure as shootin', that outfit headed fer here is a weddin' party. I'll gamble the Seventy-Six on it!"

And Old Man Tom Gillette, of the Seventy-Six, had never been what you'd call a gambling man.

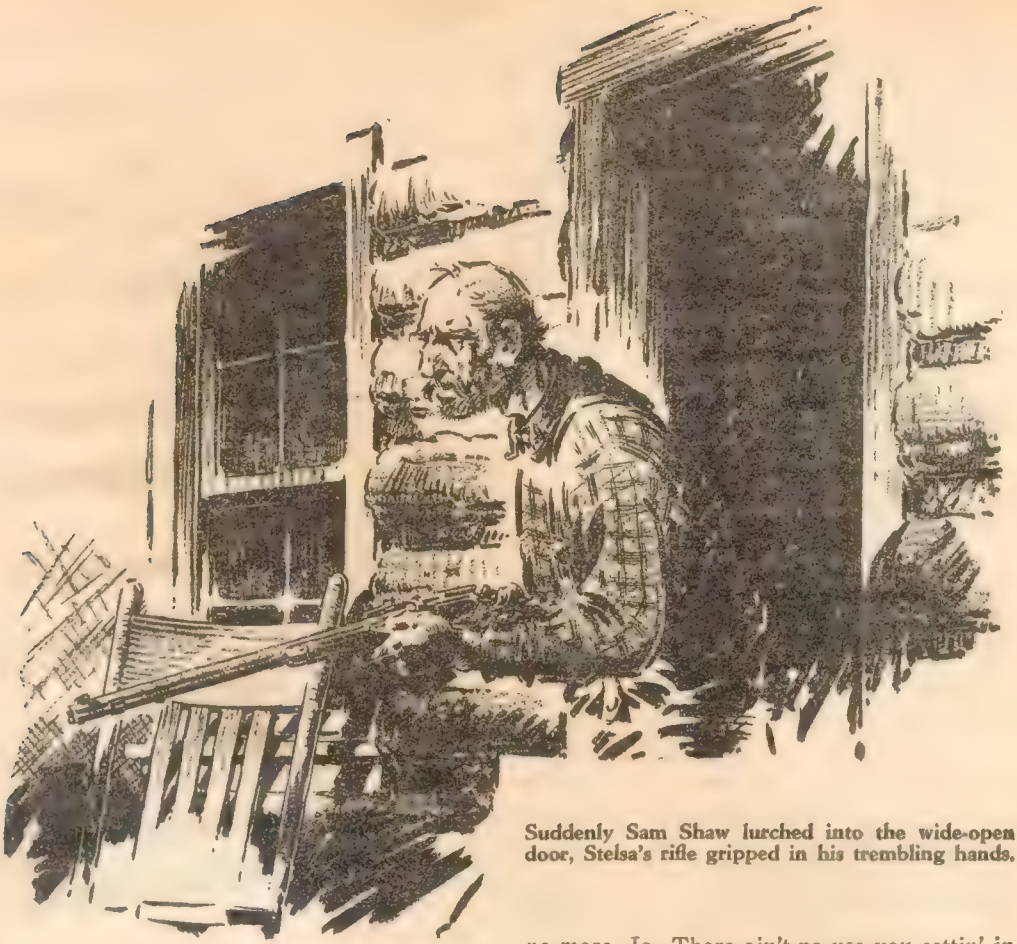
THE END

FREE WATER— OR FIGHT!

Dramatic Novel of Gun-trapped Sodbusters

By Rod Patterson

"It's no good tryin' to buck Broken Bell," predicted old Sam Shaw, but Joanna declared: "Home is worth anything—even dying for." Which gave Dave Stelsa his choice of fogging it out of Cow Creek and keeping alive, or striking back at Big Phil Magoon, and reaping a bloody harvest of dead hopes—and dead hoemen!



Suddenly Sam Shaw lurched into the wide-open door, Stelsa's rifle gripped in his trembling hands.

CHAPTER ONE

Hell Comes to Cow Creek

JOANNA SHAW, silent, gravely thoughtful, sat in Dave Stelsa's homestead cabin beside the bunk on which her father lay staring steadfastly at the ceiling beams. The day was unbearably, unbelievably hot. Cow Creek Flats had never known such heat as this. For long months it had blanketed the land with a bluish yellow haze, an invisible yet destructive force that scorched the grass, burned crops, avidly sucked water from stream and river.

Moisture made an oily film on the girl's forehead; tendrils of red-gold hair clung damply to her temples. The air was so still it was hard for her to breathe—it was so thin Sam Shaw was having trouble drawing enough of it into his deflated lungs to keep from smothering.

Out of a lethargy that seemed depthless, Sam finally spoke: "Don't bother with me no more, Jo. There ain't no use you settin' in here all the time."

"Hush," said the girl. "I want to sit here; and you're not a bother. Just lie still and don't try to talk." Acutely worried and uncomfortable, Jo nevertheless endeavored to keep the reflection of her state of mind from the old man. A really beautiful girl, not yet thirty, this raw wild frontier land had worn her down, although even the hardships she had endured had not been able to destroy the quiet gentleness that was the bone and sinew of her character.

"I was a selfish fool," Sam went on weakly, "fer bringin' a gal like you into this hell-hole of a country. If I c'd only change it, I'd die easier."

"You mustn't talk, father," Jo said in her soothing voice. "Dave says you've got to rest."

"What's Dave know about doctorin' sick folks?" Sam demanded petulantly. "He's a hoeman, same as the rest of us."

"He knows more than you think," the girl said. "And don't forget he took us in here—"

Sam lifted his hands, then weakly let them fall back to the threadbare counterpane. "Shore, he's been good to us. I only said he don't savvy what it means to git gut-shot like I been." Sam Shaw was a long, extremely thin man, in his early sixties, and one on whom worry and near-starvation had left their mark. Wounded three weeks before in a boundary ruckus with the cowboys of Broken Bell Ranch, he had steadily lost ground in his fight for life and lately no longer seemed to care whether he lived or died.

Dave Stelsa's homestead claim sat at the westerly opening of Lost Mule Canyon. Here, between high, up-jutting red rock walls, squatted his pine-log shanty and rough sheds. In front of it Cow Creek ran its erratic course over a shallow, gravelly bed, almost dry in this first week of August, and showing salt-white pockets and little bays of alkali.

Beyond the mouth of the canyon was a view of the Flats, undulating onward for some ten miles toward the benchland which was the domain of Broken Bell and other cattle spreads. This had been cow country for sixty years—had, until two years ago, been indisputably in control of cattle-herders whose leader and spokesman was Phil Magoon, owner of Broken Bell and boss of a hard-riding, quick-tempered cow crew.

Dave Stelsa and the Shaws had been but three of many people who, from diverse motives, had come to Cow Creek Flats with the first land rush two years ago and had won quarter sections in the public drawing at Cibolo Tanks. All had traveled here from the North and the South to dry-farm the land and build a maze of irrigation canals in the red conglomerate soil, and these grangers had been doomed inevitably to clash with the cattlemen—particularly with Broken Bell—although they did not realize it until it was too late to move on to safer and more peaceable land.

Phil Magoon was a rawhide martinet whose family had settled in this country of West Texas when it was a wilderness ruled by Indians. Magoon was an arrogant, thoroughly intolerant man, big in stature and voice, a bull of the plains who looked with scorn and bitter resentment upon the gaunt farmers whose cabins and pine-slab shanties had appeared on the open range, seemingly mushrooming overnight.

INSIDE Stelsa's cabin, Sam Shaw lay motionless on his bunk, covered by the apathy which so resembled death that it filled Jo with a sharp alarm. And then a step sounded in the inch-deep dust of the dooryard, and Dave Stelsa came in, ducking his head a bit to clear the door which was not quite high enough to pass his solid frame erect. He was twenty-eight, broad of chest and shoulder. Iron-hard muscle bulged his biceps and swelled his threadbare hickory shirt, drawing the sweat-stained material tight across the back. His legs were long and solid as post-oak logs; yet he carried his weight as jauntily, as casually, as a dancer.

Stelsa halted in the center of the bare-walled room, lowered his flat-lidded cobalt eyes to the old man on the bunk. "I brought this water. Had it buried in the ground all night." He raised the heavy jug by one finger and set it lightly on the deal table near the bunk. "It's pretty cool."

Jo rose slowly from her chair near the side window. She filled a tin cup with water, and moved to the bunk and slid a strong arm beneath her father's back, propping him upright for his drink. "Thank you, Dave," she said to Stelsa, although she did not turn her head to look at him.

Stelsa, who had a cynic's sharp observation, noted the tense way she held her willow-slender body; and he noticed that, although she didn't smile, a gentleness molded the firm full line of her red mouth. She had not smiled since her father had been carried out of his burning shanty three weeks before, and her troubled gravity had increased during the days and nights in which she had valiantly tried to nurse him back to health.

Stelsa dropped his somber words: "Broken Bell just grabbed our catch basin and closed the dam. Alvy Petersen tried to fight Magoon's men off but they were too quick for him, and Magoon's got a guard posted at the spillway."

The girl eased her father back to his pillow, turning at once, her dark eyes narrowed on Stelsa's expressionless face. "Well, we've expected that," she said in her level, candid voice, "haven't we? Now we'll lose our crops—lose everything. Unless—"

Stelsa took a turn around the room, measuring his steps deliberately, carefully. "I'm pleased about the whole thing," he said with heavy irony. "Maybe now we can get together, like we should've from the start. If we don't organize there won't be a homesteader left on the Flats by fall."

"It's no good tryin' to buck Magoon." Sam Shaw spoke in a shallow, listless voice. "Look what it got me. I never should've stood up to Broken Bell like I done. Magoon's like a big wind—he blows down everything he hits. Besides, he said barbed-wire means boot-hill for grangers, and he meant what he said!"

Stelsa stared down at the old man, his black brows forming a sharp V above the ridge of his straight-boned nose. "If life was so important to you when you brought Jo out here, why ain't it now?" he asked gruffly.

"I'm too old to fight." Sam closed his eyes

and made an incoherent sound in his throat. "Throw me out in the dust. Jo can go and stay with the Darbys."

"I wouldn't kick a dog off my doorstep," Stelsa said impatiently.

"I—we're only in your way," Sam sighed.

"You're stayin' here," Stelsa said, "and keep me company. Been tired of talkin' to myself so long."

Jo was watching Stelsa, a softness in her eyes, a kind of chiding smile on her lips. "You are a strange man, Dave. Cynical yet kind—all at the same time."

She moved to the door and passed out into the noon's glaring light. Stelsa hesitated a moment, then followed her. She was waiting, and she looked at him and said, "I've been wondering why you aren't like a farmer—like other men on the Flats."

"I'm as big a fool as all the rest," he told her flatly, bitterly. "Maybe bigger."

"You're running away from something," she murmured. "From yourself perhaps."

"Perhaps."

"You have a way—a gift with your hands and your voice," she said frankly. "I wish you'd make father want to live."

"I've watched his wound," Stelsa said. "It's healed. Now it's up to Sam whether he gets well or not."

"You're harsh with him."

Stelsa gave her a quick, hard laugh. "He needs something to make him forget his own fear. That's what he needs—not soft words and pettin'."

Jo turned and walked back into the cabin, a straight and somehow rebellious figure in her plain blue gingham dress and high-buttoned shoes. Stelsa, tall and taciturn, watched her go, and the coldness left his big-boned face and faded from his somber eyes. He moved down the canyon and out to the flat ground beyond the opening in the high rock walls.

Before him lay the acres of corn he had planted nearly two months ago. The corn presented a panorama of neatly laid-out rows, but the stalks were stunted and seared by the impact of the incessantly burning sun. Two shallow irrigation ditches, running back to the main canal which bisected the Flats and fed dozens of other farms, now showed but a trickle of water, for the big catch basin which the farmers had gouged out of the distant bench and lined with broken stone had now been seized by Phil Magoon of Broken Bell. And Magoon would retain control of it unless compelled to give it up by force of law or a power greater than his own.

IT HAD been a high-handed act when Broken Bell had locked the sluice-way against the grangers who had constructed it and who needed the water behind the dam in order to survive on Cow Creek Flats. But Stelsa knew that there were laws to protect the rights even of homesteaders, and he was determined that those statutes must be made to work, or gunsmoke rule would irrevocably reign.

When Stelsa returned to the cabin he found Letty Darby sitting with Jo beside old Sam's bunk. Letty was thirteen, a tall and robust girl with a round, sweet face and a head of short, flax-yellow curls. More like a boy in her checked shirt and blue denim jeans, she could be seen almost any afternoon riding her paint pony on the Flats. Her parents had settled on a quarter-section close to the granger's dam and, with the aid of Alvy Petersen, whose shack was hard by, had acted for the farmers on the Flats by opening the spillway gates twice a day throughout these long months of drought.

Letty glanced up in a friendly way as Stelsa came in, and said, "Ma sent some broth over for Sam—Pa shot an antelope last week."

"That's fine," said Stelsa matter-of-factly. Then, he looked at Jo and said, "I'm hitchin' up. Told the boys to meet me in town at three. Like to drive along with me?"

Jo nodded with pleasure, and Letty said, "I told Jo I'd stay with Sam this afternoon while she gets a rest." She reached over and stroked the old man's bony shoulder. "It's the heat that's got you, Sam. Just wait till rain comes—and cooler weather. You'll be as chipper as a jaybird on a rail."

Stelsa and Jo sat close together on the high seat of the old spring wagon that afternoon as the team of gaunt bays moved out of the canyon and hauled the rig slowly over the trail to Cibolo Tanks. Ahead, made vague by the haze of heat and dust, could be seen the rigs of other homesteaders converging on the road from east and west.

Stelsa absently watched this activity, and they heard the distant jangling of pole chains, the slogging beat of hoofs. Wagon wheels lifted and dropped thin cascades of dust that glinted like sparks thrown from a grindstone against the hot sun.

These people with starved-down faces and stern eyes had come from every point of the compass—men, women and children from the Kansas plains, from the Missouri bottoms, from Mississippi towns and villages. A new life had beckoned, and they ventured across the great faceless continent to establish new homes at the rim of the frontier. And yet, instead of the peace and plenty they had dreamed of, they found conflict, worry, and the ever-present threat of famine.

"It's only a place to live and suffer in," Stelsa said to Jo in a tone that was bleak, remote. "And still men will shed their blood to stay. You think this land's worth dyin' for?"

"Home is worth anything," Jo answered, very gravely. "Even dying for. We've come here to build our homes, and here we'll stay—for always. I'm sure of it."

"A loco notion," Stelsa said grimly. "But life's a battle from beginin' to end. You've got to fight, or fill a quick and early grave!"

Doubt edged into Jo's next words: "Our food is gone—and now the water we need. Why don't you appeal to the sheriff—why don't we ask Hilary Smith for stores to hold us through the fall till next planting time?"

"That's what I aim to do today." said Stelsa. "First talk to the store-keeper, then to Sheriff Hurd. I told our people I'd make that try, at least, before I call for volunteers to fight with Broken Bell."

The girl nodded soberly, and for a while, they watched the land drift by, and they were held by a tacit silence, needing no words now to tell each other what was in their minds. On both side of the trail, slot-like ditches now appeared as gaping, unhealed wounds in the red soil. The sweeping, undulating fields of rye and wheat made a stunted stand as far as the eye could span, the grain tops already turning black and tinder-dry. Here and there on the prairie's lonesome flatness grangers' low-lying sod-roofed shanties made a blurred huddle beneath the heat-haze that seemed to grow thicker and more opaque against the horizon. Everywhere was dismal waste, the menace of heart-breaking disaster.

THE straggling parade of farmer's wagons came off the Flats and turned into the level, sandy main street of Cibolo Tanks. The town, originally planned as a shipping point for cattle and a trading center for outlying ranches, sat among low treeless hills at the foot of the bench, facing the open vastness of Saguaro Desert on the south, but facing the western cattle range as well: a double row of wood and 'dobe buildings strung out haphazardly, with other houses and shops huddled on two side streets leading away from the town and petering out into sagebrush and chaparral.

A half dozen grangers' wagons had entered the town ahead of Stelsa and Jo, and these were drawn up under the cottonwoods on the central square to take advantage of the meager shade. Stelsa tied the bays in the line-up, and, with Jo moving erectly at his side, walked down the street toward Hilary Smith's Mercantile.

At the cast-iron water trough—which was filled daily from the town's three huge storage tanks—Nick Oliver, a raw-boned, lank-jawed farmer, turned from watering his mules and dropped his warning words: "Better wait a while, Stelsa. Magoon jest went in Hilary's with two of his boys. The whole outfit's in town. I seen 'em drinkin' at the Silver Bullet."

Stelsa acknowledged the nester's warning with a curt nod, but he didn't check his stride, and Jo kept resolutely on beside him. Stelsa said, "Why wait?"

As they came up to the low-railed gallery of the store, the screen doors swung outward abruptly, and three men stepped forth into the day's hot glare. The tallest of the trio was Phil Magoon, broad of girth, square of face, a man with skin as thick and tough as cured rawhide, and eyes that were keen and flat and china-blue. And now, as the rancher planted his bulky frame across the path of Stelsa and the girl, the two Broken Bell riders took a stand slightly behind their boss and an arm's length to the left.

It was a deliberately calculated move. One of the men, chunkily built and black-eyed, was Lester Mallott—the other, a head taller, with yellowish eyes and a sandy stubble of beard, went by the name of Haze Hillhouse. Mallott was foreman for Broken Bell; Hillhouse was top hand.

As Stelsa and Joe moved up the steps to the gallery, Magoon hooked his thumbs over his heavily loaded gun belt and said in a loud, clear tone: "Well, nester, judgin' by the parade we seen comin' in off the Flats, you're lightin' a shuck at last. That's a plumb smart move."

Stelsa paused, his hand tightening on the girl's arm. "You better guess again, Magoon," he said, and his face was set in stubborn lines.

"You mean to say you're stayin' put?" the rancher demanded incredulously. "Listen, fella, this country belongs to cattlemen. You've come here and turned the grass upside down and fenced off free range—and what's worse, you've damned up the creeks and stole water that cattle need."

Stelsa eyed him and cut in: "There's two sides to the story, friend. You've recited yours, but you're goin' to hear ours before we're through." Whereupon, he kicked open the screen door and held it with his foot while Jo passed into the store. He followed her without another word and the door fanned the air behind him.

Hilary Smith, the squat proprietor who had been listening from the shadows of his store, now rolled forward between counters piled high with merchandise. But there was no friendliness on his flabby face; his cheeks were pale and streaked with anxiety. Before he could speak, however, Phil Magoon called through the screen doors to him in a hard and warning voice. "Remember what I told yuh, Hilary. One cent's worth of credit and I'll take our trade to Sandyville."

The storekeeper seemed to cringe under the hard-flung words. "You see?" he said in a hang-dog tone. "I can't do business with you people any more, Stelsa. I—"

Magoon's voice cut across the merchant's whining words. "Stelsa, you better tell your people to pack and drift," he said, "because you won't get a drop of water from that dam of yours! In ten days' time I'll make Cow Creek Flats as dry as the blasted lava beds of hell!"

With that, he turned and strode off.

CHAPTER TWO

Terror at the Tanks

STELSA was standing on the board walk in front of the Mercantile. Jo remained at his side, tall and straight—one hand holding back the dry tendrils of hair which the hot wind was blowing. When Stelsa spoke, his tone was quick and hard. "Go back and wait for me at the wagon, Jo. I'm goin' to put this up to Sheriff Hurd."

Beneath the brim of his old black hat, his face was as still and gray as the fronts of the buildings across the square. The sun struck down slantingly on the town; shimmering heat waves lay under the wooden arcades of those drab buildings and rose from the dust so that all objects seemed to vibrate, and that vibration was the only movement.

The girl considered him with her steady, fearless glance. "It will do no good, Dave," she told him gravely. "I'm sure the sheriff's under the heel of Broken Bell. It was the cowmen who elected him last fall. But Banker Finsterbush may help us out. He loaned money to the Petersens and the Darbys when they first came here."

Stelsa looked at her, his mouth pulled wide. "Jo, trouble's comin' and it's comin' fast. I may die—others may die. But in the end, the grangers are goin' to win!"

She returned his gaze, her own filled with a serious, intent regard. "I'm not afraid," she said slowly, softly, then turned and swung back toward the wagon under the cottonwoods, a block away.

Stelsa went on over the square and, a moment later, faced John Finsterbush in the office of the red-painted Cattlemen's Land & Mortgage Bank. Finsterbush looked up from a table he was using for a desk, a long, thin man dressed in box coat and stiff-bosomed shirt and collar and black string tie. "Hullo, Stelsa," the banker said in a curt, almost unfriendly tone.

"I'm speakin' for the grangers." Stelsa came to the point without delay. "We've had bad luck with our crops and you know about our trouble with Broken Bell. I'm askin' for a blanket loan, sir, to carry us over the next few months."

Finsterbush sat still, with sunlight from an open window shining on his pale forehead, shadows dark on his gaunt cheeks, and in the sockets of his colorless eyes. He had been tapping the desk with the end of a quill pen, but now he stopped tapping and his face turned hard. "You oughta know better'n to come here for a loan," he said crisply, coldly. "The stockholders of this bank are cowmen to a man."

"You loaned money to some of us last fall."

"Last fall ain't now," the banker argued irritably. "Since then you people have made a damned nuisance of yourselves."

Stelsa stirred his boots on the rough pine floor, staring at Finsterbush with his gray indomitable eyes. "You're a fool if you don't recognize what the grangers have done for this town. In a few years' time Cibolo Tanks'll be the center of the richest farm and cattle land in the state."

"You'd make it a sod-buster's paradise," the banker retorted, "if you had your way!" He slapped his desk with an open hand. "You'll have to get your loan somewheres else, Stelsa! Phil Magoon's chairman of the board of this bank. Doesn't that mean anything to you?"

"You've said enough. And we'll remember it when the pay-off comes," Stelsa said. He turned with these bitter words and walked out.

Sheriff Charlie Hurd was in his cubby-hole office adjoining the little 'dobe jail. Grim of jaw and eye, Hurd had the self-assurance of all cattlemen, the conceit of a selfish man who had been elected to office unanimously. "What can I do you you?" he asked as the tall young homesteader came in and stopped before his paper-littered desk.

"If you don't want a war on your hands," Stelsa told him bluntly, "you'll have to protect the grangers and their rights."

The sheriff's face took on a crafty look; his cloudy grayish eyes shrank down to slits. He stood up, placing his gnarled hands on the desk, leaning over it. "If that's a threat you better change your tune," he said with quick protest in his reedy voice. "Others've got some rights as well as you."

"Magoon's illegally grabbed our dam," Stelsa said insistently. "And I'm demandin' that you make him give it up."

Hurd sat down slowly, deliberately. "Hold on—hold on," he said in a more lenient tone. "Look, Stelsa, Magoon and his friends always used the water you dammed up in your catch basin, and he feels he's got first claim on it. I can't interfere in this. You'll have to take it to court and fight it out there."

"No," said Stelsa flatly. "We'd starve before circuit court meets next falls. We need food and we need water—and we need it now!"

THE sheriff's sorrel-colored brows came down. "I admit you've lived up to residence requirements so far, but possession's

nine points of the law—and Magoon's settin' on your dam." He hooked his thumbs in the arm-holes of his cowhide vest. "I can't help you so far as that spillway goes, but maybe I *could* put something good your way."

Stelsa stared, not speaking. Then Hurd dropped his voice to a whisper, leaning confidentially across the desk. "I got a friend that wants to help you squatters out. Can't tell yuh who he is, and you'll have to keep my name out of it, too."

"Spit it out."

"This hombre is willin' to grubstake your people. All he wants is a lien on your acreage and farm machinery, and he'll take a blanket note to cover it."

"A careful gent," Stelsa commented sarcastically. "No matter what happens to us, he'll collect plenty."

The sheriff shrugged, smiling thinly. "Take it or leave it."

Stelsa thought a moment, then blurted, "All right, give me the papers—I'll get the signatures."

Hurd got up and moved to the rear door of his office, calling, "Keene—Hambly!"

Two men came in from the outer yard, and stopped. Hurd threw his grating words at them. "This here's Dave Stelsa, the boss of the squatters. Deliver them two wagon loads of stores at his place tomorrow afternoon and pick up the paper he'll have for you."

Both Keene and Hambly were strangers to Stelsa. They were of medium height and dressed in nondescript trail garb. Both had the same quick eyes and long-slanted wary faces, the same dark skin and saddle-hammered bodies.

"Looks like you had this all cut and dried 'fore I walked in," Stelsa said suspiciously. "I don't like the smell of it, Hurd. Not a little bit."

The man called Hambly said with some truculence, "Ain't you kind of fussy fer a nester in a tight?"

"Yeah," Keene said, his oblique eyes pinned coldly on Stelsa's still face. "You better treat Bill and me like we was gents and not a pair o' damned sidewinders. I've said all I'm goin' to say."

The sheriff interrupted with his flat voice: "Shut up, Ed." Then, to Stelsa: "Here's the contract you got to have your people sign. You sign it, too." He rummaged in the pile of documents on top of his desk, and handed a legal-looking paper to Stelsa who scanned it briefly, then said, "It says here we got to pay off five thousand dollars in ten months—or on demand."

"Well," the sheriff hedged, "that's just in case Broken Bell comes out top dog. This friend of mine has got to pertect hisself, that's all."

"I still say it smells," said Stelsa, "but I got no choice." He stowed the paper in his coat, then turned and left the jail without further words.

Outside in the glaring sunlight, he walked across the square and cut down Dakota Lane, heading for McNulty's Hay & Feed Store. He received the same refusal of credit from the sly-eyed dealer there that he had got from Hilary Smith, and, after a brief argument, returned to the square, now in the grip of a building anger and frustration.

Traveling back toward the Palace Hotel and the spot where the grangers' wagons were drawn up beneath the trees, the first thing he saw was Ed Keene and Bill Hambly where they stood haranguing a large crowd of Cow Creek men in front of the Silver Bullet Bar across from the hotel. Worry hardened Stelsa's mouth as he quickened his pace, heading for the crowd. And then he saw Phil Magoon and Mallot and Hillhouse on the hotel's gallery. The three were sitting in chairs tipped back against the blotched white 'dobe wall, seemingly oblivious to the activity of the grangers across the square.

Suddenly, Stelsa realized that Keene and Hambly had stopped talking, and now the sullen, haggard eyes of the grangers were turned toward the hotel and the three men who sat there so indifferently. He caught the low mutter of the farmers' voices, like the distant rumble of a rising storm. The fools! Were they trying to start a gun ruckus here in town? Stelsa broke into a run that carried him to the edge of the crowd as the grangers surged abruptly toward the hotel gallery. Vaguely he sensed that Keene and Hambly had vanished, and he knew then that the two men had incited the farmers to premature violence, then had made themselves scarce before trouble could start.

Nick Oliver, one of the homesteaders, reached the hotel first, and stood spraddle-legged in the dust. He threw out his angry voice. "Magoon, we'll blow our dam to hell if you don't open up the valve!"

NOW the three Broken Bell men were on their feet and moving out toward the gallery rail. Magoon's voice commanded the street—it rang out through the dusty town, echoing hollowly from the buildings' high facades. "The valve stays closed, and that's my final word!"

Stelsa shouldered his way forward through the crowd and broke out at its inner circle, determined to stop the riot that now seemed certain to explode in all its fury upon the town.

At the same moment Stelsa reached the high plank walk, hoofs sent up a steady clatter somewhere out behind the milling crowd. And then, suddenly, startlingly, a party of horse-

men swept into the central square from the opening of Dakota Lane, fanning out rapidly as they rushed toward the hotel and converged on the crowd which now was wheeling to face this new threat.

Phil Magoon's big voice boomed out once more: "Bust 'em up, boys! Bust 'em to hell and gone!"

The sound of hoofs came louder and faster-paced, and the sudden taunting yells of all those Broken Bell riders lifted above the flat hot roofs of the town. Stelsa, caught in the shifting throng, drifted with his friends into the square, and now his voice overlaid all that racket harshly, commandingly. "Stand fast, you antelopes! Don't let 'em ride us down!"

The uproar of hoofs and voices increased; and hoofs and boots mingled in echoing surges of sound, and voices went up and up as the grangers stubbornly stood their ground. The Broken Bell riders came on and charged into the outside line, carrying these men backward under the relentless pressure of horses' packed bodies.

Grangers began to go down under the lash of hard-swung quirts, falling beneath the hoofs of Broken Bell. Magoon's men spurred hard against the surging crowd, mercilessly cutting into it, pulling out, then rushing in again to a fresh assault.

Now, at last, a few of Magoon's men had been pulled down from their saddles, and fists made dull, squashing sounds. Then Broken Bell gave ground, then rushed again, hitting the ranks of the homesteaders, scattering men like chaff blown before a gale.

Stelsa was sucked suddenly, violently, into the center of a wicked and bloody dogfight, then flung aside. Someone reached out of the crowd and grabbed him by the shirt, and another man dived head-long off his horse and landed on Stelsa's shoulders, carrying him to the ground in a long, sliding fall that plowed dust up like an explosion. He lay still a moment, stunned, gasping. A man fell directly across his outstretched body, and Stelsa began fighting to fend off legs and knees and punching boots. He came upright, hitting out blindly, furiously, seeing nothing, thinking only of flesh and bone to strike and bruise. He picked his targets recklessly, hitting hard and fast, dropping men in their tracks, staggering others backward into the arms of their comrades.

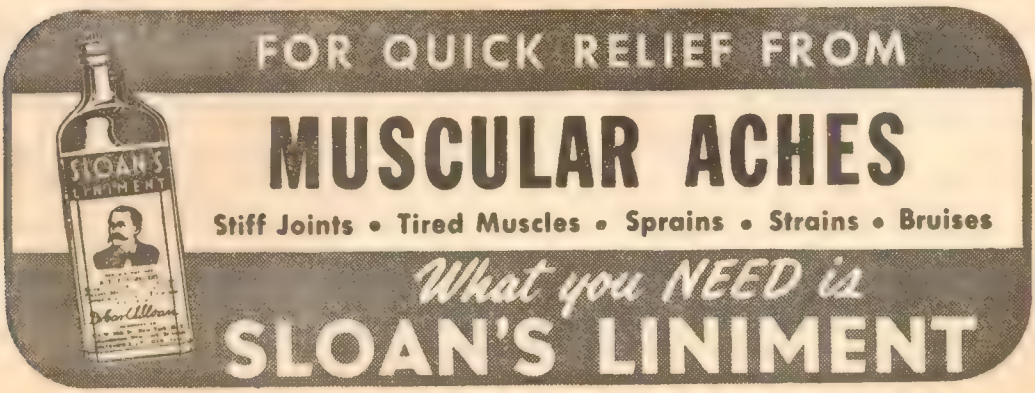
Out of the ruck of fighting men and rearing horses, Phil Magoon appeared suddenly, clubbing his way with bare fists through the crowd. Stelsa flung himself into the core of the fight, reaching Magoon and challenging him.

"Come on, Magoon! You asked for this!" He bashed a balled fist into the rancher's set face; and Magoon yelled and lunged at Stelsa, his attack sweeping Stelsa back against the seething wall of human bodies in back of him. But Stelsa bounced back, closing swiftly, dancing over the boiling dust, stabbing out with right, then left. He reached Magoon's jaw again with a hard-thrown blow, then reached out and dragged the cowman toward him and clipped him in the face, holding Magoon for a second while he battered him savagely, ignoring Magoon's retaliating blows. He hammered the rancher and threw him backward and trod on his boots in his eagerness to flatten him in the dust.

Everything—fighting men, dust, the bedlam of voices—faded in to a blur and Stelsa saw nothing but the big man who somehow could not be beaten to his knees, but who now was laughing as he took Stelsa's chopping blows, appearing more like a rock than a man.

Magoon lowered his head and charged. He had a bull-like strength, and he had the ponderous speed to match it. He struck Stelsa at the end of that short, thrusting charge, and knocked Stelsa off his feet down under the thrashing boots of the crowd. But Stelsa came up and wheeled and closed with the rancher and cuffed him in the temple and hurled him back.

Stelsa kept advancing, inching his way under Magoon's upflung guard; and he kept up



his barrage of blows, seeing that square vindictive face as through a fog. Back—back—and Magoon's face was bloated and red under that incessant hail of rights and lefts. Lips drawn tight, eyes bright with rage, Stelsa drove his man back steadily, battering him, cutting him with his blunt-boned fists. Then, suddenly, Magoon's arms sagged down. Stelsa measured him and hit him in the face. Once—twice—three times—

The boss of Broken Bell went down at last; his knees bent under him and his head tipped back and astonishment painted a blank look on his bloody face. He fell like a tree, slowly, massively—went down with such force that his thick body bounced and quivered as he struck the hard-packed ground. . . .

CHAPTER THREE

Free Water—or War!

AT DUSK that day the bruised and blood-stained grangers congregated in front of George Benish's homestead, three miles east of the Cow Creek Dam. After the fight with Broken Bell, they had hastily left town before Magoon had time to rouse up his neighbors on the bench. Now, at Benish's, the men gathered before the log house while their women, white-faced and terrified by the recent ruckus, remained tensely in the wagons under the dooryard locust trees.

Dave Stelsa had told the grangers about Sheriff's Hurd's deal—he hadn't mentioned the sheriff by name—and the contract had been signed by some forty grim-faced men. Only one man had held out against signing the agreement. Alvy Petersen had proclaimed his disapproval in a rancorous voice. "I don't like doin' business with an hombre that's afeerd o' comin' out in the open. How do we savvy this deal ain't some kind of a trap rigged up by the cattlemen?"

Benish, a tall, leathery-faced farmer, expressed his impatience in a derisive voice. "What've you got to lose, Alvy? You're single and on your own while the rest of us have got women folks and younkers to think about."

Stelsa spoke, not angrily, but quietly, reasonably: "I don't like this deal any better than you do, Alvy. But we've got to hang together in everything now, or hang separately in the end. At least we won't starve for the rest of the year."

Petersen signed, still protesting, however; and Stelsa tucked the document into his shirt, saying, "We may as well face it, boys. This afternoon's ruckus was just a start. You listened to Keene and Hambly and let 'em prod you up, and now Magoon'll most likely start shootin' at windows and open doors, tryin' to spook us out."

"You tryin' to say we got to shoot back at Broken Bell?" George Benish demanded in a shocked tone.

"We've got to go through with it now—even if Magoon does start gunplay," Stelsa said.

"But," argued Benish, "we ain't made to fight with guns."

"Can we draw fast?" Alvy Petersen asked indignantly. "No! Can any of us fire a gun from a horse and hit anything? No! I say we oughta take Magoon's rawhide and wait till we're strong enough to beat him in circuit court. We'll git an injunction—"

"No—no!" Till Boland cried, agitated by this talk. "We'd lose our grain if we wait for the law to back us up! What about the dam? What about all the labor we put in on the catch basin and the ditches we've dug? Are we goin' to throw all that away?" Till was an old man and a peaceable one, but his anger had been whipped up by Broken Bell's ruthless attack that afternoon. "I say we got to go up and throw Magoon's men off the spillway—and we oughta do it now!"

"A loco idea," put in Petersen scornfully. "With folks comin' in to the Flats it won't be long afore we'll outnumber the cattlemen two to one. It's a matter of patience—and now we'll eat for a while, at least, and we can draw drinkin' water from town."

"One sure thing," Stelsa cut in with heavy irony, "if we get to janglin' amongst ourselves, Magoon'll pick us off one by one. Make up your minds what you want to do and leave me know by tomorrow afternoon. I'll make storage room for the grub that's comin' in and we'll dole it out equal as it's needed. That's all I've got to say." He turned and moved toward his wagon, grinning up at Joanna Shaw as he swung up beside her on the straw-stack seat.

At the same moment the prairie drummed hard under flying hoofs, and Nick Oliver came roaring out of the dusk on his sorrel mare. Oliver's voice laid its panicky yell across the yard. "Broken Bell's fenced off the dam! They fired on me when I went up to look!"

"Well," Stelsa murmured to the girl, "that means Magoon's camped on your claim, too. Maybe your dad was right when he said it's only a fool that'll buck a cattleman."

WHEN Stelsa and Jo reached home it was full dark. After unhooking the bays from the spring wagon and turning them into the basswood pole corral, Stelsa and the girl walked slowly up to the cabin whose windows made square blocks of yellow light against the canyon wall. They found Letty Darby still sitting beside Sam's bunk. The old man was sleeping and his gentle breathing was the only sound in the room.

Letty stood up, her eyes troubled. "He's decided to die," she said, and moved toward the door. There, she paused. "Dave, could he live if he really wanted to?"

Stelsa nodded; Jo faced him, her face showing fine lines of weariness. "Dave, help him. You can do it."

Stelsa stood motionless, his fingers automatically loading his pipe. A pessimism controlled all the planes and angles of his lean face; his eyes were keen, morose. "Well, if he dies Magoon'll have to answer for murder. Maybe it'll be better that way—better for Sam, too."

Jo never flinched under that flat statement. And she realized more strongly than ever that Stelsa's cynical manner was a pose; that he was deliberately hardening himself against sympathy.

Letty had gone, riding her paint pony into the night, and Jo was preparing a quick meal at the woodstove when a rider came into the dooryard at a steady gait. A moment later, Luke Benteen, a gangling, big-footed farmer, entered the cabin, holding one hand carefully in front of him. "Stelsa, I wish you'd look at my wrist. I think I broke it in the fight this afternoon."

Stelsa hit the man with his sharp words: "Why should *I* look at it, Luke?"

The granger gave him an affronted stare, and sudden anger turned his thin mouth into a hard-drawn knot. But pain was stronger than his indigation, and he shoved his hand at Stelsa, not speaking.

Stelsa stared at him a moment, then took the hand and turned it toward the lamplight. His long fingers moved over the man's wrist—with Jo watching narrowly from the stove—and Stelsa's touch was deft, practiced. "Just a sprain," he said bluntly. "There's a doctor at the Tanks."

"Yule won't treat a hoeman," Benteen said suddenly. "You know he won't."

Stelsa shrugged indifferently. "Why come to me?"

"Nobuddy's got a right to hold back a gift when it's needed," the granger said resentfully.

"He's right, Dave," Jo spoke up quickly. "You're a doctor yourself. It shows in everything you do—the way you dress father's wound, the way you looked at Luke's hand just now. And this afternoon you patched up ten men—"

"Never mind," Stelsa replied grimly.

At that moment, hoofs set up a clatter in the yard, and a rig rolled up before the shack. The driver could be heard climbing to the ground and moving toward the door. Without knocking, the driver came in out of the night. It was a spry, small man with a stubble of gray beard and a hurried manner. "I'm Doc Yule," he announced, and set his black bag on the table beside Sam's bunk. "Heard you got a gun-shot case up here." He speared Luke Benteen with his pin-sharp eyes. "What's the matter with *you?*"

The granger held out his hand, silent, wondering.

Doctor Yule grunted. "You should've stayed home. I been makin' the rounds and would've come to you sooner or later."

Stelsa's voice flattened into the silence. "Who sent you, Doc? Who's payin' your fee for treatin' the grangers?"

The medico busied himself with his bag. "Can't tell you that. He's a friend of you squatters—that's all I can say now." Whereupon, he moved to Benteen and strapped his wrist with tape, afterward waking Sam Shaw and examining his wound "Who's been dressin' this wound?" the doctor asked, abruptly facing around.

"Dave has," said Jo quickly.

Yule pursed up his lips and whistled softly. "A clean job," he said, then hit Sam Shaw with his quick voice. "You're all right. That wound's healed up. Why ain't you up and walkin', old man?"

Sam swallowed hard. "Why, I—" He stopped, staring his gray eyes at Stelsa, who was grinning sardonically. "If I'm all right, doc, I'll make a try. I thought—"

Doctor Yule slapped his black bag shut and stomped toward the door. "Trouble with you grangers, you feel sorry for yourselves," he said, then let himself out into the night.

Jo's dark gaze sought Stelsa's, and she said, "You were right, Dave. I see it now."

Stelsa looked at the girl through the haze of his own pipe smoke. He said softly, gravely: "Yule's the one that's right. We've all been feelin' sorry for ourselves."

BILL HAMBLY and Ed Keene arrived at Stelsa's claim at two o'clock the following afternoon. The two heavily loaded wagons drawn by teams of dray horses jounced down the canyon trail from the east and pulled up in the dooryard. Keene sat on the high seat of the first rig, Hambly on the seat of the second. Their saddle horses trailed behind, tied by a lead rope to the tailboard of the rear wagon.

Hambly remained on his wagon, placidly busy with his chew of niggerhead. Keene, however, swung to the ground, facing the cabin and Jo Shaw as she came out drying her hands on her apron. Keen stamped the stiffness out of his legs, saying to the girl, "Where's Stelsa?"

Jo met the man's thin stare, saw the strong feeling whip across the surface of his narrowed eyes; it was hard for her to answer him, therefore, in a civil tone. "He's at a meeting of the grangers," she finally forced herself to

say. "He said for you to wait here for him."

On the second wagon, Bill Hambly settled himself with his back propped against the load, his big-brimmed hat pulled low over his eyes. Ed Keene, however, had something on his mind. There was a kind of sly insolence on his dark, long-slanting face as he advanced slowly toward the spot where Jo stood before the cabin door.

"Well," he said with an effort at a grin, "I seen yuh in town yest'd'y, miss. And I said to myself, there's a gal with fire, the kind of a gal I'd like to meet. My name's Ed Keene."

Jo stiffened, and her eyes went blank. She had no power to speak at that moment while Keene came slowly toward her; her mind was moving too rapidly. And she was watching him too closely. Then, from the cabin, her father called sharply: "Jo! Who's there?"

"That was the old man Magoon's boys shot up?" Keene asked, very softly. "Tell him you got a caller, Jo."

The girl pulled back almost imperceptibly, and Keene came on and stopped in front of her, measuring her with his flat-lidded eyes. "You live here with Stelsa now, don't yuh, Jo?"

"Stand back!" Jo flung at him. "Don't move another inch!"

"Now, now," Keene said gently, "I ain't touched yuh. Not yet."

"Get out of here!" Jo faced him resolutely now, her eyes blazing out her rage.

"No," Keene said in the same soft tone. "No, I guess I'll stay."

Stelsa's rifle stood just inside the cabin door, and Jo now moved sideways toward the opening, holding her tight glance on the man who came so close. But Keene saw her intent and he slid suddenly past her, blocking her way with his stringy frame. He studied her with mocking, hungry eyes. "Stelsa ain't no man for a gal like you. You need an hombre with the ready cash."

Jo threw herself against him then, striking out with both hands, pummeling him with her fists. She kept driving against him, trying to throw him back. Keene clawed out and caught her by the shoulders and around the waist.

She hit him on the jaw and her fingernails raked through his skin and she felt him cringe away from her. His hands pulled at her and she tore out of his grasp, hearing cloth rip, and then she fought him with a blind, furious anger—catching his face with her nails repeatedly until he had to let her go and stagger back.

Boots scraped in the cabin at that moment, and, suddenly, Sam Shaw lurched into the wide-open door. He was fully dressed and he had Stelsa's rifle gripped in trembling hands, had the shining barrel angled on Keene, who was starting for the girl again. "Clear out of here!" Sam hollered in his high-pitched voice. "Git!"

Keene fell back from the cabin, a look of shocked chagrin on his dark face. Hambly, roused by the sound of the old man's shrill voice, clambered to the ground. Sam lifted the rifle and let go with one shot. Keene and Hambly broke out of their tracks, turned and ran for their saddle horses at the second wagon's tailboard. Then they were a-saddle and spurring out of the canyon and toward the Flats. Sam fired again, aiming over their heads.

Jo was shaking; she was so weak that she could not lift her arms. Her heart throbbed in her throat, and she found it hard to breathe. She turned to the cabin, and moved through the door, followed by her father whose face was flushed with excitement and rage. Jo sat on the edge of Sam's bunk, bent over and tense. She said, "I must not tell Dave. Dave would go after them and be killed! We mustn't tell him, father! Promise me!"

CHAPTER FOUR

Hot Lead Harvest

COMING up toward Lost Mule Canyon, Dave Stelsa heard the two shots lash the hot still air, and he lifted his roan into a steady run. The sun stood high over the land, screened behind its own smoke and fury, and blue shadows ran like water across the heated earth.

A mile from his canyon claim, he spotted two riders far off on his right as they cruised down the trail toward Cibolo Tanks. At the same moment, another rider came up out of the Flats on the left, about three miles away, and, as Stelsa galloped on, he watched the little ball of dust kicked by this rider grow larger as the man pointed his horse toward the canyon. When Stelsa ran into his own dooryard, minutes later, and dropped from the saddle, he noted the two freight wagons and their teams drawn up in the thin shade of the cottonwoods. He turned immediately toward the cabin, and suddenly was confronted by Joanna Shaw.

The girl appeared composed, though she held up the torn shoulder of her dress with a hand that visibly trembled. "I—I'm glad you've come," she said faintly.

"I heard two shots," Stelsa said, "and just now saw two men ride down toward town. What happened?"

"It was father," Jo told him in the same low tone. "He was shooting at that old coyote, and—"

"Where's Keene and Hambly?" Suspicion edged into Stelsa's voice. "Sure *they* weren't the coyotes your dad was shootin' at?"

Jo's breath ran out sharply. "They—had to leave. Dave, why do you stare at me like that?"

"They wouldn't leave here without that contract," Stelsa said curtly, "unless somebody gunned 'em off the place."

She met his gaze, her own wavering away. "Maybe they'll come back for the contract."

"Your dress is ripped. How'd it happen?"

"It was an accident." Color stained her cheeks; she stood there in the yellow-white flare of the sun, shoulders drawn up suddenly. "Dave, please don't look at me that way!"

Hoofbeats sounded in back of Stelsa at that moment, and came closer, now echoing against the sounding board of the canyon walls. Stelsa observed the high-riding shape of George Benish as the thick-set granger flogged his horse into the cabin yard and skidded it to a halt. "Git on your hoss, Dave!" he yelled. "Hell's goin' to bust loose at the dam! They sent me out to bring yuh there! Letty Darby tried to break through and open the spillway valve, and Broken Bell fired on her!"

Stelsa moved deliberately. He mounted his roan, said, "I'm ridin' to town, George. You better go back and try to hold down our folks till I get there. Be there soon's I take care of a little unfinished business."

Then, to Jo, who has gasped and was staring at him in dismay: "Stay here with your father, Jo. And tell Sam to use the rifle again if anybody tries to run off those loads." Then he turned his roan, sent it sloping out of the yard in a cloud of dust. Benish cut his sweat-streaked bay around and followed him, but when the granger cleared the canyon's mouth, he cut the horse at right angle and spurred west in the direction of Cow Creek Dam.

All the land was filled with its thick yellow-blue haze, and heat grew ranker, and the air was so thin that mere breathing became labor for man and horse. Stelsa urged his roan relentlessly down the trail toward Cibolo Tanks.

A half hour later, when he came racking in off the prairie, the town, raw and dusty and bare, lay before him in the strong sunlight. The weathered buildings flashed past him as he wheeled down the street and crossed the square and reined up hard in front of the 'dobe jail. He dismounted, scanning the town for a moment, seeing only two saddle horses tied before the jail, then continued across the walk and reached the jail's iron-studded door. There he stopped, held motionless and listening by voices murmuring within.

HE identified the garrulous voice of Sheriff Charlie Hurd at once, and caught his words. "John," the sheriff was saying, "you're as spooky as a cat in a barrel with the head on. Quit worryin' and leave me handle everything. I keep tellin' yuh I'll git that contract from Stelsa. Keene and Hambly had to light a shuck, Keene said, because that loco old man out there got proddy with a gun."

A second voice lifted angrily, then. "Dog-gone it, Hurd, I wish you hadn't sent them two hombres out to start trouble at the dam till I had that paper salted down! Now, when the guns gits goin', Magoon'll tear into the squatters and they'll wipe each other out 'fore I git my mitts on anything! I'll be left without a thing to prove my claim on that Cow Creek land!"

Stelsa drew a shaken breath. For he recognized that whining voice and caught the meaning of the words. It was Banker John Finsterbush doing the belly-aching. And now it came home to Stelsa that Finsterbush was the man who was secretly backing the homesteaders! It was Finsterbush who had craftily plotted to have the cowmen and the grangers kill each other off in a bloody range war, thus leaving him in control of Cow Creek Flats!

Stelsa didn't wait to hear any more. He reached out for the latch, turned it quickly, then kicked the door open with an outflung boot. He moved into the office, lifting his gun from the leather and covering both men impartially. Hurd and Finsterbush were caught flat-footed. Both men were seated at the sheriff's desk, and their big hats turned, their faces loose and white with shock. "All right, boys," Stelsa snapped, "I've heard all I need to know! Might've known you were a pair of double-crossin' skunks!" He walked up to the desk, staring down with his icy eyes. "Wait till Phil Magoon hears how you were gettin' set to sell him out. Your hides won't be worth the price to salt 'em down!"

Finsterbush gulped out, "Now wait—" and light from the doorway touched his face, revealing the fear in his deep-set eyes, the stark terror that painted his gaunt cheeks.

"Stand up, Finsterbush!" Stelsa rapped out. "You're takin' a ride with me!" He waggled the point of his gun at Hurd. "Don't make a move, sheriff, or I'll knock you down!" With his left hand he reached down and lifted the sheriff's gun from his belt, tossed it out through the wide-open rear door. They all heard the weapon hit the dust.

Finsterbush was on his feet, hands pushed high, and he was moving toward the street, a pale wariness in his slitted eyes. Suddenly he bleated, "What're you goin' to do with me?"

Stelsa said, "Get on your horse!"

In the street, the banker obeyed the command, swinging awkwardly up on one of the ponies at the long tie rail. Stelsa moved to the sheriff's animal, took the coiled rope from the saddle horn, then moved against the banker's horse, shook out a loop and tossed it over the banker's skinny shoulders. "Pull your arms through," he ordered, then took up the slack.

"When we move, fella, we move fast—so keep your feet anchored in the stirrups and don't try to throw the rope. I'll drag you on your damned face if you do!"

THE sun struck straight and hard on the crowd of grangers that had gathered on the Flats just east of the Cow Creek Dam. It was well past three o'clock, and still there had been no hostile move from the nesters other than a low, murmurous grumbling as they stood or squatted on their heels, in small knots, or in scattered pairs. To a passerby the crowd would have appeared no more menacing than a gathering of laborers, picks and shovels on their shoulders. They seemed almost listless, with their reddened faces lowered against the sun, a seedy-looking lot—men in dungarees and linsey-woolsey shirts, men with wide-brimmed, high-crowned hats, men in flat-crowned hats, men and boys whose thin faces reflected the hardship and privation they had endured, the rancor they projected toward all cattlemen and particularly Broken Bell. A hundred yards or so behind this crowd, huddled in a shallow basin fringed by greasewood trees, were the women of the Flats whose faces and garb seemed to blend naturally with the tan prairie.

Cow Creek Dam showed as a grayish strip of mud and stone high up on the slope of the mesa which continued to rise gradually, ending a thousand feet above in the plateau pastures of Phil Magoon's big cow spread. Between the spot where the grangers stood and the stone-lined spillway of the dam, the barbed-wire fence which Magoon had recently thrown up, ran in haphazard fashion across the broad face of the slope. And behind this glittering barrier of new wire sat Broken Bell, holding a position of strict watchfulness. There were some twenty-five or thirty riders in that group of cattlemen; and they were strung out along the wire, confident though somewhat restless in the way they kept shifting their horses back and forth along the fence. And the massive shape of Phil Magoon showed in the foreground of this group. Gun-iron set up a constant glitter in the glaring light.

A lone rider came whipping in off the prairie from the east; and this was George Benish who galloped up to the crowd to throw powder on the fire of the nesters' smoldering rage. Benish's nerved-up yell rang out: "Stelsa said fer us to wait, but I say to hell with it!"

Almost at once the crowd shifted and broke out of their tracks, some men running back toward the trees where the women crouched expectantly, huddled and brown against the dry, charred earth. Suddenly, startlingly, men were moving toward the barbed-wire fence that blocked their way to the dam beyond. All carried firearms now: six-shooters, Ball saddle carbines, Springfields, turkey-guns and big-bore, octagon-barreled Hawkes. As the throng of some fifty grangers started up the slight grade toward the fence-line, they appeared small and insignificant. Their weapons seemed too heavy for them to tote, and they advanced as if with great effort, converging slowly, deliberately, on the mounted men who faced them across the wire.

Nick Oliver, Alvy Petersen and Till Boland led the grangers' advance, and the three farmers held their guns preparedly, staring with slitted eyes out through the glare to where the burly figure of Phil Magoon sat, silent, indomitable, on his big-barreled Apaluse.

Although short and inclined to stodginess, Nick Oliver had whipped his anger up and now set the pace, walking far out in front of his comrades, and puffing a little to hold his position. The crowd moved steadily behind him, and, at that moment, a stir of uneasiness passed along the line of Broken Bell horsemen. Cowboys whispered to each other. Lester Mallott, foreman, moved in closer to his boss. Haze Hillhouse came up along the line to take his post next to Mallott, with his rifle angled across his saddle horn. And now, suddenly, all the Broken Bell men were staring questioningly at Phil Magoon.

THE crowd of farmers came on; and everybody waited for Magoon to make some sign, but nothing happened. The big rancher stiffly sat his horse, silent and saturnine, challenging the grangers with his tight blue eyes. Magoon was a young man, but he didn't look young now—the youthfulness had drained out of his blunt-boned face, leaving it lined and somber. His jaw jutted out slab-like and gaunt under his hawk-like nose. He made an impressive picture in his calf-skin vest and big white hat, with the two six-shooters riding low on his cartridge belt.

Out in front of the crowd, Nick Oliver came to a sudden halt, checking the men in back of him with an upthrown hand while he gripped his old buffalo gun with the other. He stared deliberately at the armed men across the shining strands of wire and threw out his blustering words:

"Magoon, pull off your dogs! We're goin' to cut this wire and bust open the spillway valve or burn in hell!"

Magoon's eyes were very blue and very bright. He allowed a silence to give impact to his first words, then he yelled, "Nester, you've got one foot in hell right now!"

"Is that your final word?" bawled Oliver.

"It is, by God!"

The line of riders fidgeted nervously. Horses seemed to feel the strain with the men who sat astride them. And now Broken Bell

began to move their mounts away from the wire, circling back again in a solid, unwavering line. A few men who had left their rifles nested in saddle-scabbards now deliberately drew them out; and breech-blocks clattered in the dry, still air. They watched the grangers move forward once again, watched this ragtag crowd dip over the last rise and reach the fence. As the homesteaders came against the wire, Magoon's big voice boomed out, "Dismount and fire!"

Broken Bell left the saddle in one quick, united surge, each man gripping his rifle as he touched boots to the ground, each sliding swiftly behind his horse. Alvy Petersen and Nick Oliver whipped out wire-cutters and lunged for the fence. Both went down as the first volley of rifle fire broke over the prairie.

Then other gunfire crashed on the sultry air. Leveled rifles spurted orange fire into the close-packed ranks of the grangers, and other men dropped in their tracks and lay twitching in the dust; and Broken Bell stood fast behind a barricade of horse flesh, and fired, and fired again.

And then the nesters opened up with their ancient guns. Jarring reports rang out and a hail of lead poured over the barbed-wire barrier. Broken Bell fell back. Horses dropped, thrashing more dust out of the hard-baked earth; others reared and went bucking off into the drifting haze of powdersmoke. And now Phil Magoon was the only man left in the saddle, and, like a sagebrush general, was shouting orders to his men who ran back and forth, bent at the hips, crouching close to the ground. The hot sunlight lay garishly over the sparse mesquite on the slope; it glinted on rifles and saddle gear and broken wire, shone palely on the metallic dust that poured over the slope and the dam above like a silver fog.

DAVE STELSA and John Finsterbush hit the trail for Cow Creek Flats, hoofs drumming a swift tattoo over the rutted, rocky road. The gaunt banker, like the tail of a kite, whipped after Stelsa, eating his dust, clinging desperately to his saddle horn, screaming curses, fighting the rope that linked him to the man ahead.

On Dave Stelsa's face was a look of implacable determination; and yet he would rather have charged death alone and single-handed than be confronted by the scene he feared awaited him at the dam. Every mile across the Flats he felt a dread of the moment he would hear the roar of gunfire in the low red hills ahead.

He tried to tell himself that nothing mattered now but the fact of eventual peace for the homesteaders; that, even though grangers and cowmen died like flies in the knock-down-drag-out fight for the dam, it would be worth the sacrifice of life to make this country free. And yet Stelsa could feel no lift, no sense of victory, for he had no assurance that John Finsterbush would, in the presence of Magoon and his men, admit his plot to seize the land when the men of power were dead.

Stelsa heard the firing as he came in sight of the bench. It sounded scattered and desultory at first, but as the moments passed and they rushed on, the racket of the guns increased. And, at last, shouting could be heard.

Still towing Finsterbush behind on the rope, Stelsa broke out of the rolling hills finally and thundered up the grade toward Magoon's fence line where the grangers were locked in battle with Broken Bell. The farmers showed as a blackly moving mass of men beneath the mercilessly glaring sun.

Stelsa rode headlong into the ruck of smoke and screaming lead, and suddenly his voice lifted loud and clear above the din of guns and shouting men. Rifles and six-guns winked through the dust and against the brush, and then, abruptly, they ceased their iron-throated thunder. A silence that was almost deafening came down on Cow Creek Flats as Stelsa and Finsterbush pulled up.

Broken Bell still held the strip and the wire fence; and Phil Magoon was still seated on his horse though he had been hit in the chest by a bullet and was gray around the mouth. The rancher pushed his tight gaze against Stelsa's stiff-set face. He threw his voice across the wire. "Are you askin' for a truce?"

"No!" Stelsa's answer came whipping back at him. "I'm askin' for plain horse-sense, Magoon. The fightin's gone far enough!"

Magoon pointed toward John Finsterbush who was cringing in his saddle, dead beat from his wild ride. "What's he doin here?" the rancher cried. "What's Finsterbush got to do with this?"

"Plenty!" Stelsa answered curtly. With his gaze pinned on Magoon's gray face, he stepped down from the saddle and moved toward the banker's horse, came against it and dragged Finsterbush to the ground. "Now, talk!" he snapped. "And do it fast!"

The banker squealed and pulled back and

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swung wildly at Stelsa's face. But Stelsa gentled him with a flat-knuckled smash to the jaw. that staggered the man to his knees. "I'll talk —I'll talk!" the banker howled, and he stayed there on his knees, all the fight, all the defiance knocked out of him.

Then, as he stammeringly recited the details of the plot he and Sheriff Hurd had hatched against the cowmen and the grangers, the boss of Broken Bell stared down at him across the wire, a look of blank amazement on his face. And suddenly Magoon was swaying in the saddle, his blue eyes glazed with pain. The spreading stain on his shirt-front grew larger, and blood dripped from his finger-tips.

When Finsterbush had finished with his fantastic story, Magoon turned his befuddled gaze on Stelsa, muttered, "I—don't savvy it, quite." He was weaker now, and his massive shoulders seemed to be wilting down as if pressed by a heavy weight. "I heard about that grub that was freighted to your place, Stelsa, but—"

Stelsa stepped in with his quick voice. "Finsterbush and Hurd moved those stores to the Flats," he said, "figurin' the grangers would put up a finish fight if they had food enough to stick it out. And we would've stuck it out, Magoon. We'd have kept buckin' you till either you were dead or we were salivated. And if that had come, Finsterbush and Hurd would've stepped in and grabbed the Flats, lock, stock and barrel!"

A great weariness showed on the rancher's haggard face. He pulled his shoulders up and let them fall. At that instant his eyes ceased to focus; his grip loosened on his saddle horn and he sagged sideways in the kack, slipping slowly, massively, to the ground. Haze Hillhouse jumped forward and caught him under the shoulders as he fell.

Then Les Mallott moved up slowly with the rest of Broken Bell strung out along the wire in back of him. "This don't change a thing," the foreman yelled. "If Phil kicks off it'll be granger lead that finished him!"

Coincident with Mallott's defiant cry, loud voices lifted down the slope where the grangers had gathered in the sun. Stelsa faced around and saw two riders holding their horses in and earnestly exhorting the nesters, pointing toward the wire, urging them to go in and finish what they had started out to do. Stelsa knew both men—Ed Keene and Bill Hambly! And he moved to his roan and mounted it and cut the horse around and rode the two men down. Stelsa's voice beat on the sultry air. "Get out of here, you two! Get out!"

Both riders flung their mounts around; and the faces of both men were streaked with hate —their eyes held cold dead stares. Keene spoke no word; he made no sound. He stabbed his horse with a spur and lunged it toward Stelsa as he came up. Hambly followed suit. Keene went for his gun, but it never cleared the holster.

The slap of Stelsa's hand on the butt of his own gun made a flat sound. His elbow broke high. He fired, hearing the echo of the shot slam out across the Flats. Ed Keene's body jerked, and he stood up in his stirrups, a twisted shape that slowly pivoted, then pitched swiftly to the dust.

Hambly bleated out his fright; he didn't even try to draw, but whipped his horse around and wildly swung his spurs. The animal bolted forward and veered away, lining out for the hemming hills. Stelsa fired. Hambly threw up his arms, swaying back over the cantle of his saddle. The horse bucked onward, but Hambly, jerked out of the saddle, hit the ground hard and did not move again.

A voice from the crowd of grangers yelled, "Who said a farmer can't hit nuthin' shootin' from a hoss!"

CAREFUL hands had carried big Phil Magoon into the cramped living room at Alvy Petersen's log shanty on the Flats. Magoon, hard hit, had nearly bled to death during the half hour it had required to move him from the dam. But now a silence hung over the cabin, and clamped down on the crowd of grangers and cowmen who faced each other warily in the hot dooryard.

There was silence inside the cabin, too. And there was peace there under the low sod roof as Dave Stelsa slowly washed his hands in the basin on the bunkside stand, then turned to face the girl who had come here to help him save a life. He said: "He'll pull out of this, Jo. These fool cowmen are plumb hard to kill."

Joanna, still white-lipped from watching Stelsa probe for a bullet with a jack-knife and a table fork, handed him a towel to dry his hands. "Dave, you—were wonderful! But I can't understand you—I don't see why a surgeon—"

"Never mind that." He dried his hands, then methodically inspected the bandage around the unconscious rancher's chest. He didn't look at the girl, but said, "I told you once before most men are fools. And I'm a bigger one than most. I lost a patient once, and blamed myself. You see?"

"I see," Jo murmured understandingly. "And now that's past. You can start again—"

"Sure." Stelsa laughed—a sound the girl had never heard him make before. "I'm goin' to start by givin' orders for a change. And first I'm goin' to cuss this cow-nurse out, because he's a bigger fool almost than me. His foreman told me it was Magoon that sent Doc Yule out to the Flats to patch the grangers up after the scrap in town. Magoon ain't so blast-

ed tough—it was just his pride that made him act that way."

"But what about Letty Darby—and dad?"

"Magoon thought Letty was a man—the way she wears her clothes," Stelsa explained. "And Sam called their bluff—they had to gun him down or get shot up themselves."

On the bunk, the boss of Broken Bell stirred his big frame and groaned. Then, slowly, his eyes began to open, and he was staring blankly into Stelsa's face. "What—knocked me out?" the rancher breathed. "What—"

"You fainted, is all," said Stelsa with a grin. "Lay still now or I'll bat you one. You've lost a bucketful of blood."

The rancher lay back on his pillow, lips gray against a dead-white face. His breathing was steady now, and growing steadier as the moments passed. He gripped the edge of the bunk with his big rope-calloused hands. "Stelsa, did you git that bullet out? It felt like I had a brisket full of lead."

"Your hide ain't made of boiler plate," Stelsa told him dryly. "I always figured cattlemen were tough, but now I've changed my mind. Grangers are tougher by a lot. You were the tenth man I worked on, and the only one that passed out cold!"

Magoon grinned sardonically. "Blast your gizzard, Doc," he wheezed, "I'll square that crack when I git out of here!" There was a short run of silence, and then he said, "We've all been fools, Stelsa. And I been the biggest one, I reckon. What happened to Sheriff Hurd?"

"He's a hundred miles from here by now. He lit a shuck."

"Finsterbush?"

"We got him in the jail," Stelsa said. "There's a cowman and a granger watchin' him. Tar and feathers're too good for him, but we'll have to let him go if his books are straight."

Magoon drew a shaken breath. "Look, fella, go out and tell my boys this gun feud's off for keeps. And bring Les Mallott back with you. I got something to say to him afore I take some shut-eye."

Stelsa looked at Jo, and grinned. Something definite passed between them on that long and steady glance—something that made her blush and look quickly away. "I'll go," she said, then, straight and proud, she walked out of the silent room.

Presently the sound of cheering voices lifted from the yard and those cheerful calls reached through the cabin's thick log walls. Magoon held out his hand to Stelsa. "Shake, nester," was what he said, and Stelsa gripped his hand firmly.

Joanna Shaw came back. Then Let Mallott came in and stood, staring down into Magoon's smiling face. "Boss, you sent for me?" he asked.

Magoon folded his big hands on his stomach, and, still grinning, said, "Well, what's the idee of standin' there? Git on up to the dam and open that spillway up! The grangers need water to save their crops, and they need it now!" His bright blue eyes traveled to where Dave Stelsa stood with Jo across the quiet room. "And don't nobuddy try and tell me yuh can't raise cabbages and cows on the same blasted range!"

THE END

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The Bullsnake Bend

CHAPTER ONE

Volunteer Fugitive!

FOOTSTEPS sounded closer, dangerously close now. The midnight drizzle of the late-spring rain was cold and miserable. Men with guns, sharp eyes and ears, made it worse. Andy Spurlock hugged the wet ground under the dripping bushes, holding his breath as hoofs slapped through the mud on the slippery little trail just above him. A cindered splattering sounded higher up there along the tracks, where coaches of the Westbound Parlor Car Express were trying to get underway again after the holdup and pull on across the trestle spanning the deep chasm of the river. A group of horsemen had arrived just a few minutes too late to prevent the holdup. Some of the bolder ones had left their saddles, and now were searching carefully over the slope. Those up there on the tracks were galloping back and forth with oaths and yells.

Bad luck had tagged Spurlock's trail for nearly six months now. And tonight—unarmed, broke, and hungry—Bullsnake Bend had capped the climax, through no fault of his own. Pushing westward through these tall Wyoming hills with the prospects of a job forty miles west of the river, he had followed the little trail north of the tracks. Twenty five or thirty minutes ago he had turned down a slope to cross the tracks, and had ridden slap-dab into the tail-end of the holdup, staged by a swarm of masked horsemen at the lonely little telegraph shack and the old water tank just east of the trestle.

A leak had come from somewhere, upset-

Dynamic Novel of a Fighting Fugitive

Rebellion

By Tom Roan

ting the plans of the daring men staging the job. Excited possemen had come pouring onto the scene, most of them from Skull Rock, a little cowtown at the end of rusty telegraph lines eighty miles off the railroad to southward. Guns had started crashing and roaring as Spurlock came drifting across the tracks behind the last coach, entirely unaware of what was going on. His bay had bolted down the slippery trail, an old rein letting go. Fifty rods above the river his feet had gone from under him. Spurlock had flung clear of the saddle, striking a wall of brush and rolling. Before he could get back to the trail the bay was up and splashing on down the trail, a wild fool of a horse scared half to death by the gunfire lashing above him.

It was just as well that the bay had gone on with an empty saddle. More possemen had been coming across the swollen ford below the trestle. The horse had slammed into the

"Better take it without the blood, Garrison!" Spurlock yelled.

Everyone on Gunsmoke Range had good reason to fear ruthless Crash Garrison. . . . But when he picked Andy Spurlock for a job the Devil himself would have turned down, he lit the fires of undying hate in that youngster, starting a gun-flame holocaust that would take more than the blood of all the honest men on that Godforsaken range to extinguish!

mob and had been caught. A silver plate with Spurlock's name on it was on the cantle of the saddle, and now they were looking for him.

Twelve men, according to the excited talk everywhere, had hit the train, and five of them acting as a rear guard were slow in getting away and had been shot down as they fought it out to give their companions a chance to escape. They had not died alone. Four of the possemen had been killed, also, and three or more seriously wounded.

The outlaws had been thorough. The telegraph instruments had been smashed. One masked bully had beaten the helpless operator into insensibility with a six-shooter and had tied him up under the water tank. Crowbars taken from the little tool house just beyond the tank had forced the express car door. The same outlaw who had mauled the telegraph operator had rammed the muzzle of a six-shooter into the expressman's ribs, making him open the strong box and deliver up forty thousand dollars in currency. The money—and the seven remaining bandits—had disappeared completely.

To have tried to get up and surrender to this crazy crowd would have been suicide. They were drunk with the blood they had spilled, and angry because they had been late in reaching the scene.

THESE men pounding the brush afoot were the ones to fear the most. By the sounds, Spurlock knew there were six or seven of them, men who were not going to let anything fool them. One of them was no more than six feet away now, to the right, where a tangle of brush stopped him momentarily. Another was just below, cursing the brush as he sawed through it.

"If we only had a way of swingin' that engine headlight around," the one below growled to his companions, "we'd be able to see somethin'. I know them smooth cliffs below us. A gopher couldn't get up over 'em; that sidewinder's got to be here somewhere."

A grunt from the man to the right answered him. It would be all over in a few seconds if something was not done in a hurry, and Spurlock arose to his hands and knees, setting his heels in the mud. Suddenly he was coming up, his right fist shooting out with his full one hundred and sixty pounds behind the blow.

"Damn!" A six-shooter roared as the man yelped the one word and went down, the flash of the shot a blinding glare. The one blow had been a solid one. Spurlock dropped, snatched the six-shooter from the half-limp hand, and wheeled. As he did, a shot came from the man below, and the whole slope seemed to spring into action.

"Here he is! He's downed Butch!"

Spurlock fired one wild shot. Even now he would have tried to surrender, but they were giving him no chance. Men above and below were opening up as he tore on through the brush like a startled buck. In a moment the slope was a scene of the wildest of confusion. Lead flew, and men's voices lifted clamorously.

Spurlock slammed almost headfirst into two of the yelling possemen as he hit the bottom of the slope. He knocked one of them sprawling with the captured six-shooter, and fired over the second man's head to turn him and send him fleeing. A moment later Spurlock fell and the raking brush tore the six-shooter out of his hand. He got up and plowed on, the roar of guns still gashing the rainy darkness behind him, the yelling keeping up with men cursing each other and shouting warning cries. As if to add to the din, two sharp blasts came from the locomotive whistle and then the train was pulling out, just as he reached the edge of the swirling river and fell, utterly exhausted, into the rocks and brush that dotted the terrain there.

Luck came to him as the Westbound crossed the trestle. The fireman was shoveling coal into the firebox. Light from the opened door whipped up, a flashing high glare in the night, and he saw the raft a few yards to his left downstream. It was a crude affair, constructed from eight crossties spiked together and used at sometime in the past by a bridge gang making repairs to the trestle down near the water. A clumsy sweep was fastened to the rear end of it, and a rope around an old snag held it moored to the bank.

Blessed by a heavier downpour of rain, he untied the rope and pushed off when the train was gone. Men were still pounding the brush and the tracks above him, some of them hot behind him. He hugged the high bank the best he could until all sounds had faded out behind him; then he used the sweep to move out in midstream. The water gurgled, whispered and hissed under him. The raft rocked, steadied itself by its sheer weight, and then it was sweeping along, moving about as fast as a horse could trot toward the dark walls of hills and deep, dark canyons that lay ahead, to southward.

THE rain was gone at dawn, the skies clearing. The fast clip the old raft had set in the beginning had died away within a mile. In most places after that it had been a snail's pace at best, but the high banks of the river had been shields at either side of him. Then there had been the low banks of fog and the blackness along the water, so dense in places that one standing on the edge of the stream could not have seen the raft.

A low stand of willows with a tangle of limbs overhanging the west bank made a good place to use the sweep and drift in. The water was ordinarily deep here under a smooth wall of rock. Spurlock tied up to a limb, and waited for the light to brighten before climbing the bank for a look around. The country was high and wild, but he was not yet far enough from the railroad to be safe. His old slicker had kept off some of the rain, but he was damp all the way through—cold, damp and hungry enough to chew whang leather.

The coming of the sun dried him out, in time, with his clothing hung on the brush in a little opening. He slept after a fashion, and mid-morning brought six horsemen stringing down the opposite side of the river. One could not mistake them. They were possemen, armed like brigands and worn out from hours in the saddle. They passed, watching the river and hills, still looking for him and that forty thousand somebody had been yelling his head off about at the scene of the holdup. Later in the day another string passed, this time along the skyline a few miles to westward.

After darkness had settled, he decided to dare the river once more and keep a sharp watch for signs of campfires ahead. Progress was again slow, the raft picking up on the crest of the currents here and there, then dropping back to a snail's pace. When morning came and he sought the east bank of the river, he knew he could not be more than fifty miles south of Bullsnake Bend.

He had felt safer and had kept drifting until the sun was up, but it was the end of the raft here, though he tied it up again under another overhang of limbs. The walls were high around him, a rough and awesome place, and Spurlock saw several strange looking little trails leading down the breaks in the west walls.

The river had broadened into rippling shallows, no more than belly-deep to a horse for three hundred yards. Beyond the ripples the river plunged into a gash between two huge shoulders of rock and became a spouting spillway over immense rocks in its bed. Anything sucked into that raging cataract would not live for many seconds before being ground, whipped and dashed to pieces.

It was good to be on dry footing again as he scrambled up the bank to a flat shelf of ground covered with low trees and grass. He had just come over the rim of the bank and straightened from his hands and knees to push in the tail of his shirt when every muscle stiffened and his eyes widened, his hands slowly lifting to let the old slicker on his arm drop.

A shiny little ring, smaller than a dime and as bright as silver, stared at him. For an instant, the ring seemed to be suspended in midair, and then, behind it, extended a blue-steel rod that was a carbine's barrel. A man in gray was both over the gun and behind it, for he sat squatted on his spurred heels, his back to the bole of a stubby tree. He was big, broad and deep-chested, his hair the color of cured straw, the wide intensely amused eyes cool blue under the brim of a gray Stetson.

"I always thought," he smirked, lips warping into a slow smile, "that most men in this country carried guns. You surprise me, maybe, as much as I surprise you. Let your hands down, stranger, and relax. My saddle gun's cocked, and I'm a dead-shot when I curl my finger on a trigger. Anybody will tell you that about Crash Garrison."

CHAPTER TWO

Crash Garrison

HE WAS around fifty, about twice as old as Spurlock, and even larger than he had first seemed when he slowly arose with a long black Colt sagging a heavy cartridge belt at either hip. Without lowering the hammer on his carbine, he tossed the weapon carelessly across the crook of his left arm.

"When you shoved the tail of your shirt

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in," he grinned. "I could tell you were without a gun. Guess you lost them or threw them away. I remembered that crosstie raft when I saw it coming. Saw it only a few days ago at the bridge. For all I know, you could be that hombre the law is lookin' for. They got his horses, and his saddle with his name on it—"

"I was on the way," Spurlock began, "to the prospects of a job when I rode into that holdup."

"Easy now!" cut in Garrison. "I don't hear some things very good. Besides," the blue eyes narrowed, "I never like a man who talks too much. Crash Garrison is known for keeping his lip buttoned. I own Gunsmoke Range," he nodded downstream. "Go in for good horses, mostly, and I mean good. Not many cows. No matter," he shrugged, "I can use a good man. Pick up your slicker. The boys are cooking breakfast down at the cabin. We shot a six-point buck last night and caught some fish. Come on."

Garrison fell in a yard to his right. There was nothing openly threatening about it, but it did place him in a position where the muzzle of the yet-cocked carbine would keep Spurlock covered as they headed downstream. And men like this big bruiser would not hesitate to shoot. Down in this wild country, it would mean no more than pulling a trigger and giving the victim a push into the river. The rocks in that terrific spillway would do the rest, carrying a body for miles before tossing it back to solid ground. In some deep whirlpool, it might be sucked down and never be seen again.

And Garrison was not the type to befriend a wanted man just for the sake of lending him a hand. The thought had already bolted through Andy Spurlock's mind that he was the kind who would be thinking a lot about the loot taken from the Westbound. The holdup of a hold-upper would be simple here, and such a man would not hesitate to seize that forty thousand—if he could catch the right man.

"Sometimes we have to be careful." Garrison gave him another one of those sly grins. "Might be explanations. Little old Pat Moore of Skull Rock can be damned inquisitive. He's sheriff of these parts and it was good for *somebody* that he was not at Bullsnake. He was out of town when Old Joe McGee, his deputy, got the tip-off. Joe's too slow even to catch a cold. He fooled around so long somebody cut the telegraph line between Skull Rock and Bullsnake Bend before he could flash a warning to the railroad company."

Spurlock kept his mouth shut. There would be plenty of time for him to talk, and right now it seemed to please Garrison that he didn't. Even if Garrison turned him over to the law, he would have a better chance here to try to explain things than would have been possible back at Bullsnake Bend, now that the mob spirit had had a chance to die down.

They rounded a shoulder of the hills to their left a few minutes later and entered the narrow mouth of a brush and pine-choked gorge. The cabin ahead was hidden until they were almost on top of it. It was a long, low affair, indifferently constructed with logs that seemed to be merely thrown together, its roof covered with sod, the grass on top of it knee-high. The walls of the gorge had widened, swinging back to make a deep, pocket about seven or eight hundred yards wide. The cabin and a short fence turned it into a natural corral in which a herd of seventy-five or eighty excellent looking horses were grazing.

VOICES came to them as they crawled through a wire gate, and six men were inside the cabin when Garrison led the way in. Here he lowered the carbin's hammer and canted the weapon against the wall. Five men were at a rough table, busy over tin plates and cups. The sixth—a long, lean old graybeard—was at work over the stove in a corner to the right. Spurlock had never seen a more wolfish lot, but his eyes did not dwell on them.

His eyes were on the food, the rich venison steaks piled on a big metal pan. Another pan held stacks of fried fish, and a tall pile of steaming flapjacks filled a third. A big, surly-looking blackbeard was seated on a keg at the foot of the table, pouring syrup in his plate from a brown jug. The odor of strong black coffee made Spurlock's eyes gleam. Then Crash Garrison spoke:

"This is Snake River Charley, boys." He jerked a thumb at Spurlock and winked. "Just got in from the Black Hole Country."

"Snake River, huh?" The blackbeard lowered the syrup jug. He swiped at his greasy lips with the back of an uncertain hand, and Spurlock knew he was drunk. "Idaho country. He looks like a slick-faced kid to me. Purty brown hair an' blue eyes!"

"Nobody asked you how he looked, Bill Hogg!" Sudden irritation was in Crash Garrison's tone. "I needed another man and sent for him. You're drunk again." Spurlock noticed what looked like big red whipcords beginning to stand out in the skin on the back of Garrison's broad neck. "My orders are that there's never to be any drinking in the morning—and especially not before breakfast."

"But hell, Crash," Hogg blundered to his feet, upsetting the keg behind him, "we'll be here all day, lyin' 'round an' waitin'. Now wait!" Hogg tried to step back. I—"

A fist hit him, a smashing blow to the mouth and nose. He went backward, staggering against one of the dark tiers of bunks against the east wall in the north end of the room. He caught himself, steadied, and then came swinging back, a wild hog on the rush, the grinning Garrison waiting for him, confident, sure of himself.

Then Garrison was into him again. A fist crashed through Hogg's flaying arms. It caught him an uplifting smack on the point of the chin and seemed to tear him from the floor. Another blow followed, a swinging left hook to the jaw. Hogg buckled, then was down, flat on the floor, his entire body suddenly limp.

"All right, Harvey, Blake!" Garrison turned to two other men now cringed over their plates as if expecting him to lunge for them next. "Drag him outside and throw a few buckets of water on him. And you, Snake River," he wheeled back to Spurlock as the two men at the table jumped to drag Hogg from the room, "get yourself a keg and start digging in. A little thing like beating up a man before breakfast shouldn't bother you. After we eat there'll be some riding to do. The fish look good, Walt." He glanced at the old man at the stove. "That's one thing you can cook."

"That's what yuh allus say." The graybeard nodded. "I allus dip 'em in flapjack batter before I drop 'em in the sizzlin' grease."

CHAPTER THREE

Unwanted Guests

AFTER breakfast it could have meant complete oblivion in hours of sleep for Andy Spurlock if he had been given a chance. He never knew how many times he piled high his plate or how many times Walt Dutrow turned away from the stove with the smoke-blackened big coffee pot to fill his cup. Garrison seemed to have forgotten the fight as soon as it was over. At the table he urged more and more food upon him, grinning as he watched him eat.

"You'll need it," he grinned. "It's rough country and plenty of it ahead."

A saddle had been found for him. Garrison now gave him a wall-eyed blue devil to ride, a snorting fool that was like dynamite exploding when Spurlock boarded him. It was a short fight, enough to tell a good horseman that this brute had been ridden before, but for a minute it was a ride such as one might have to make to win money on contest grounds. Garrison, mounted on a high-headed bay, watched Spurlock's performance with a satisfied grin.

"You're all right, Snake River," he laughed when the war was over. "You're top-hand stuff, and there'll be plenty of work for you."

With a white mare in the lead, ridden by Bill Hogg, they swung out of the gorge and went down through a long break above the river. The herd was tired, each horse bearing evidence of having been on a long trail from somewhere before they were driven into that deep gorge. Horses with all their spunk left would not have gone up and down some of the dangerous places that lay ahead in the warming sunlight.

Spurlock noted it all through eyes that narrowed from time to time. Garrison kept close to him now, always slightly behind him. His carbine was in its boot, but his six-shooter lay across his lap and ready. Spurlock was a prisoner and knew it, and Garrison made no attempt to hide the fact. As the day wore on he took pains to show it, and thoughts of the loot of the Westbound seemed to be always in his mind. Forty thousand dollars was a lot of money. He mentioned it several times before the afternoon sun was sloping down to a red eye on the hills.

Now they were going down and down, the trail rough and dangerous, the river a white-whipped streak off to their right in the mellow light. The strung-out horses slipped, slid and snorted. When they were down the slope in a grassy well-watered little valley, the gang bunched up.

They were on Gunsmoke Range proper now. In many directions Spurlock saws puffs of smokelike vapor rising. It was actually mushrooming little clouds of steam lifting from hot springs. They rounded a shoulder of tall hills, with the lazy sun coming up, and a deep, broad canyon opened ahead of them. Log ranch houses and poled corrals appeared on the east bank of the river just ahead.

"That's the Gunsmoke proper!" Garrison announced it proudly. "A grander outfit never stood outdoors, and one of these days I'll be the richest man in this country."

"All right, men." He swung off his horse at the high-beamed main gate of the corrals. "Walt will soon have something to eat for you. See that Snake River is fixed up with a bunk." He looked narrowly at Walt Dutrow. "You *know what I mean.*"

"Yes," the old man nodded. "I most generally do, Crash."

"If anything happened to Snake River," Garrison shrugged, "I wouldn't like it."

He turned with that, clanking away toward the house where four more men seemed to be waiting for him in the cool shadows of the long porch overlooking the river. Spurlock unsaddled. Garrison's half-veiled warning to Walt Dutrow had been enough to tell him that the old man was to be his boss guard from now on to see that he did not run away. The

others would be guards, also, but just yet there was no need for it. Spurlock had made up his mind. It would be safe here for a time.

IT WAS the beginning of eight days of the hardest work Spurlock had ever done. Crash Garrison was a man-driver. Every man on Gunsmoke hated and feared him, and it was soon apparent, also, that very few of them were inclined to trust each other. They kept to themselves as much as they were able, wolves shunning other wolves. They relaxed only in the evenings, laughed and sometimes prodded each other with small jokes, but their pasts were closed doors, never mentioned. One might have thought they had belonged here all their lives, had never seen anything else and knew nothing else to talk about except the happenings of the day just past.

The most dangerous one in the lot was Walt Dutrow. He cooked their meals in a lean-to-kitchen on the east side of the big old ranch house, a slow and taciturn individual, his thoughts strictly his own. If any one of the lot did not fear Crash Garrison, it was Walt Dutrow, and it was not long before Spurlock had a sneaky little feeling that Garrison feared the old man.

Crash Garrison never cursed Dutrow as he cursed and abused most of the others, especially Bill Hogg who seemed to thrive on punishment, even to the extent of having a Spanish quirt taken to him a couple of mornings when he showed up drunk on whiskey he had somehow managed to steal from a locked room in the barn.

Up first in the morning, the last to his bunk at night, and always with a gunman guarding him, Spurlock topped out the bad ones as they came. They were all good horses, the pick of the rangelands, and Crash Garrison sat on the fence, with that knowing little smirk, watching Spurlock do his chore. Garrison cleaned his six-shooter and sat polishing it on the corral fence every day. He rode to Skull Rock—ten miles to eastward— almost every night, often coming in just before dawn. He had been friendly enough for the first two or three days; then something had changed him. He no longer cast hints about the Westbound loot, and he was ready to be tied when Spurlock asked for his first favor one Saturday morning in the barn, after his eighth day was up.

"You're going into town," Spurlock told him. "I'm down to rags for clothes, maybe you won't mind picking me up a pair of pants and a shirt or two to get me by."

"Clothes, hell!" Garrison was upon him with a snarl in the shadowy hall. "You're getting protection here. Somebody's got a pair of old pants and an extra shirt you can use if you'll ask for them. I'm sticking my neck out far enough as it is."

"Garrison, you're not sticking your neck out for me." Andy Spurlock faced him squarely, the worm beginning to turn at last. "I stopped here and have stayed here only because I know the law is looking for me, but I've never intended to keep in hiding. My record's clear—and you know it by this time. Maybe you've known it all the time, and maybe," his eyes narrowed, frosty gray now, "I know a lot more about you than you think. You may kill me or have one of your crew do it, but I'll say what I think. You're a cheap dirty rat, a horsethief and a liar—"

"You can't talk to me like that!" Garrison roared and came for him. "It's time I took you in hand!"

And then Andy Spurlock hit him. Garrison had just cleaned his big Colt again. It was lying out there on the top rail of the big corral. The terrific shock of having a man dare to turn on him must have stung him worse than the blow that caught him on the point of the chin. He staggered back against the west wall of the barn, righted himself with a jerk, and then he was coming in, his big fists swinging.

Spurlock was carried backward by the sheer weight of the man. He slipped and was down. Then it was Garrison's chance. He leaped into the air and came down with both long-heeled feet stabbing. Spurlock flung himself over and made one steel-shod boot miss; the other merely grazed him. Then he had caught Garrison by the ankle, and threw him sprawling into the dust.

"You would, would you!" Garrison was up as though made of rubber. "I'll kill you now!"

But Spurlock was up with him, wary now, not to be caught so easily again. Garrison was all brute. In the cabin that morning, when he had whipped Hogg, he had shown some signs of boxing skill. However, Spurlock, if Garrison had only known it, also knew how to use his fists. He slipped through Garrison's flailing arms, landed another blow that rocked Garrison back, then caught him with another —this time a raking, skin-tearing smash across the nose and mouth. Garrison dropped, suddenly dazed, suddenly wondering how this had happened to him.

Walt Dutrow and Bill Hogg had come up and were standing there in the doorway, but neither man made a move to stop it. There was even a curious, half-smiling light in old Walt's eyes. Hogg's eyes were as round as black buttons, as if he was unable to believe what he was seeing. Spurlock saw them glance behind as Garrison started stumbling to his feet. Then suddenly they were gone, and the battle was on again.

GARRISON tore in. Spurlock dodged and ducked, hammering him back and back. They moved out into the bright sunlight. Again Crash Garrison took a wild pelting of blows, then a solid right and left through to the chin and jaw, that dropped him again. He went down in a sliding fall, and the dust boiled up in a little cloud around him. He came up breathing heavily and made a wild dive for Spurlock's feet. He missed as Spurlock leaped to one side and took another sliding, belly-first fall, the dust on his face turning to bloody mud as he came up, snarling curses.

Andy Spurlock never had been known to court a fight, but now he was giving this big bully the whipping of his life. Garrison's left eye was closed; his lips were split, and his nose smashed and torn. He began backing warily toward the fence. Spurlock had forgotten the six-shooter lying there. He downed Garrison once more when he was two yards from the fence, and Garrison lay there for a moment. Slowly then he was getting to his hands and knees, head shaking, body weaving. A strange, high-pitched voice came through the dust at that moment:

"Put the damned boots to 'im, young fella! Boot 'im! He does it to everybody else when he has a chance!"

"I'm—I'm gonna kill 'im!" Garrison's voice was no longer his own. It was hurt and half-sobbing now, mingled with hate, fury and even terror. He wheeled, lunging for the fence. "Damn 'im, I'll blast him full of lead!"

And then the shot thundered. Belatedly, Spurlock remembered the Colt on the fence. It was there, a few inches from Garrison's reaching hand, when the shot came. A bullet struck the weapon. It jumped, and flew across the fence down into a little dry wash a yard outside the corral.

"What the hell!" Garrison whirled. "Who fired that shot!"

"I did Crash," came a thin, quiet voice. "I couldn't stand here an' watch yuh shoot down an unarmed fella, could I?"

And then, the dust thinning, Andy Spurlock saw him—a little, hump-backed old man in shabby gray, with a big roan standing outside the fence, behind him. A wisp of white mustache and a straggly goatee stained with tobacco tried to decorate the wrinkled face. On the left side of the old-timer's vest a brassy-looking star glistened. He had just jacked out the hot empty shell from his six-shooter and was slipping in another cartridge. Behind him, leaning forward in their saddles with rifles across their laps, were eight hard-eyed men.

"What—what are you doing here?" gasped Garrison. "You know damned well you're not wanted on Gunsmoke, Pat Moore!"

"I ain't, I know." The old man grinned as he slipped the long Colt back into its worn holster. "The law ain't wanted at a lot of places. I take it," his shaggy-browed eyes, bleak as a winter wind, were on Spurlock now, "that yo're the fella I come to see?"

"He's Snake River Charley!" Garrison snarled. "You're looking for somebody else, Moore!"

"I think he knows who he's after." Spurlock was moving forward, watching Moore. "I'm Andy Spurlock. It was my horse and saddle that you and your men caught at the Bullsnake Bend holdup."

"Yeah, I know." The sheriff fished the stub of a half-smoked cigar out of his vest pocket and poked it into the corner of his mouth. "We've been holdin' on to yore hoss an' saddle. It's goin' to be hell on Crash, I reckon, when I tell 'im there still ain't no fat reward on yore head."

CHAPTER FOUR

Bullet Bait!

IT WAS like a nightmare coming to an end. A surge of relief swept Andy Spurlock as he took his old slicker from the fence and walked forward. Surrendering to a man like Pat Moore was not hard. Moore did not act as if he was taking a dangerous prisoner. He was, as a matter-of-fact, more or less ignoring Spurlock, his bleak eyes still on Garrison. He spoke again, his voice a threatening growl. "If yo're half a man, Crash," he told Garrison flatly, "yo'll pay this fella for the broncs he's been bustin' for yuh. We've been watchin' this place ever since yuh come in hintin' 'round that yuh might pick up the ring leader of that holdup crowd, pervided the reward was big enough to make it interestin'. This bird's worked his ears off here. Twenty-five dollars, considerin' all things, won't be too much."

"I'll see him in hell first!" Garrison roared, and started forward, then caught himself. "All I want is a fair chance to beat his head off."

"He ain't handcuffed nor tied down." Pat Moore's face twisted into a tight grin. "Just wade in, Crash. But if yuh don't pay 'im," the smile warped, "then, by grab, I'll sic 'im back into yore whiskers, an' I ain't waitin' no time atall to set 'im on yuh."

"Damn you both!" Garrison ran his hand into his pocket. "Of course I'll pay him. I'm a sport."

"Shore." Pat Moore laughed as the money changed hands. "Why, I reckon ever'body in the country knows Crash Garrison never would stoop much lower'n stealin' nickels off a dead man's eyes. Now yuh can run off somewhere an' pick me up the leader of that holdup. The governor's just offered ten thousan' dollars reward for 'im. That's more money than you

could make in months of stealin' horses."

They were riding away a few minutes later, Garrison glaring after them. Moore had brought along Spurlock's bay and his saddle. The old man had made no move towards handcuffing him. He kept to Spurlocks' right at the head of the strung-out horsemen, a chuckle breaking from him now and then as they headed for Skull Rock by turning up the old trail a mile down the canyon. When they had passed over the rim, he reached forward and plucked an old yellow glove out of Spurlock's hip pocket.

"Pigskin, ain't it?"

Spurlock nodded. "Yeah. I picked it up after I'd seen Garrison throw it away, the day after I came to the Gunsmoke. He said something to one of the men about having lost the mate to it."

"Wouldn't have throwed it away if he hadn't," the sheriff nodded. "She's big an' was once mighty fancy, but Crash allus goes in for the very best. Looks like somebody got blood on it somewhere. Mind me keepin' it a little while?"

"Not at all." Spurlock looked at him wonderingly. "I saw the blood on it when I found it. And now," he turned to one side in his saddle, unable to stand the suspense any longer, "I'd like to tell you about how I happened to be at Bullsnake Bend."

"Yuh don't have to tell me, Andy Spurlock." The bleak eyes seemed to bore holes through him for a second. "Yuh was headin' west, hopin' to find a job at Jud Parker's Wagon Wheel hoss outfit. Yuh had pawned yore gun for hoss feed an' a set of shoes for 'im the day before in Windy Mesa, 'way east of the Bend. Yuh had just enough left to buy a nickel's worth of soda crackers an' a fifteen cent plug of cheese for yoreself. There ain't a damn man in the world fool enough to try to rob a train without a gun.

"An' still," he slumped his shoulders, "I've got enough to hang yuh. This glove, now, would go far towards doin' the trick. The mate to it was found in the telegraph shack where the operator was almost beat to death. I found it in the wreck of things when I got there next mornin' at sunup. But I know damn well yuh didn't wear that glove to Bullsnake Bend. I need just one or two little things more, an' then, by grab, I aim to hang the plain hell outa Crash Garrison. I think we're goin' to make some right fast headway to what I want. Yo've got guts, an' that'll be what it takes. Now yuh listen to me. These men with me are some of my best friends. I picked 'em careful . . . "

BACK at the Gunsmoke, Crash Garrison spent a long time bathing his swollen face at the old pump behind the house. No man had ever beaten him, no man would in the end. Getting his hands on Andy Spurlock two days after the holdup had looked like opportunity tossed into his lap. Many men had come to him on the run, the law hot behind them. And the Gunsmoke had long been known as an outlaw hide-away. Its deep canyons and dark gorges made it ideal. At least a dozen men were hiding here now, men who did not dare show up around the house and corrals. Others were probably living like wild animals, afraid even to show their faces to him for a long, long time.

Walt Dutrow had been like that; he'd hidden away for four years before daring to be seen following a bank holdup in Montana. It had been the same with Bill Hogg, wanted for killing a deputy sheriff in Utah, and it was like that with the others. Men could hide out only so long, and then they had to come slipping back, gradually working themselves back to the outside and once more into civilization. Garrison drove them like slaves, fed them home-made whiskey, and gave them supposed protection instead of money. Now and then, without any of them ever being allowed to suspect, he could pick up at least a split on a fat reward from a distant sheriff, through agents who worked the outside world to keep his horse herds filled for him.

Pat Moore and his gang had disappeared over the rim, and Garrison was still bathing his face when Walt Dutrow and Bill Hogg came out of their hiding places in the barn. Four more men were still keeping out of sight, inside the house. Garrison wheeled upon Dutrow and Hogg, murder blazing in his right eye; the other was now tightly closed, and the flesh around it a big, blue-black lump.

"If I had my gun on me," he roared, "I'd kill you both!"

"Yore gun," Dutrow jabbed a thumb toward the corrals, "is still down yonder in the weeds where the sheriff shot it off the fence, I reckon. Anyhow, we followed them orders yo're allus so ready an' willin' to give. Yuh said for us to duck it when we saw strangers or the law comin'. Better let me wrop a piece of raw meat over that eye. Damn if it don't look bad.

"If yuh had listened to me," he straightened, hands on his back and his eyes on the rim, "a slug woulda been punched in that rooster's back the first day or two he was here. I told yuh he was too quiet, too easy-goin'. You figured he was just scared. He wasn't. To my mind he was just waitin', listenin' when yuh didn't think he was listenin', keeping his eyes open when he oughta been asleep. I got the feelin', Crash, that he was dangerous an' gettin' to know too much."

"Yeah?" Garrison leered and sent a nervous glance toward the rim. "Damned smart, aren't you! Don't you think Pat Moore knows we're

handling a lot of vented brands here? Don't you think he savvies—"

"Yup." Dutrow smiled faintly. "Knows, too, that yo're covered with bills of sale an' such things, all so tight-written up it would take a corral full o' lawyers to make 'em look even a mite crooked. Maybe Moore knows that these broncs come in from all over—not enough from any one special place to make men come an' start a court fight. Yo've bought some broncs from each owner, an' got bills of sales that yuh can doctor up to suit yoreself.

But," he shook his old shoulders, "there's one thing I'm hopin' Pat Moore doesn't know or seespect. That, o' course, is just what part the Gunsmoke played in the Bullsnake Bend holdup. Maybe I was just nervous, watchin' there from the barn, but it seemed to me he was lookin' damned close at that big horseshoe ring you wear. You beat that telegraph operator somethin' terrible. Yore glove come off in the middle of it or yuh jerked it off. Maybe the operator saw the ring."

"Good God, no!" Even the bruises on Crash Garrison's face seemed to turn pale. "I—I do remember that I lost the glove off my left hand that night, but —"

"An' throwed the other'n away," nodded Dutrow, "down yonder, outside the big corral. An' I saw Spurlock pick it up. He used it ever' day, right in front of yore eyes, an' when he left I saw it in his hip pocket. Now if Pat Moore has that glove—well, it'd look bad. I wanted to mention it to yuh several times, but yuh can be hell-fired stormy on a man, when he reminds yuh of a mistake. That eye, now; if you'd put a little raw meat—"

"Damn the meat for my eye!" Garrison had pivoted, white-faced, and was staring out over the rim. "There'd be hell to pay if—if that old fool—"

His voice choked, words becoming lumps in his throat, the good right eye widening. A sound of distant shots reached the group, and Garrison saw men wheeling back to the rim, and puffs of smoke rising. Then a horseman was hammering back down the trail, dust bannering behind him. He was bent low over his saddle, and riding at full gallop.

"Seems like," murmured Dutrow, "yore Mr. Snake River Charley is makin' a getaway."

"Get out the horses!" Garrison's voice was a flat bark. "This may be our chance!"

"If," Dutrow added cautiously, "it ain't a trick, Crash."

"It is!" Garrison grinned wolfishly. "Only I'm not half the fool Pat Moore thinks I am. We're going to help him pull his trick, but it won't be in a way he's going to like. Get the horses, *damn it!*"

CHAPTER FIVE

Trigger Trap

ANDY SPURLOCK seemed to be riding through enough gunfire to sink both man and horse into the ground. Four of the hotly pursuing horsemen behind him had pulled up. Rifles at their shoulders, they were blazing away at him. Bullets skipped to the right and left of the running bay while old Pat Moore and four more men raced down the trail behind him, their six-shooters roaring, making a world of noise but causing no damage.

Spurlock headed off the main trail and down a little cattle and horse trail to a V-shaped break in the bank of the river. Plunging across the shallow water here, with the stream only belly-deep to the bay, he was soon up the opposite bank and whipping in behind a rim-rocked knoll where there were other knolls and little jackpine thickets to shield him.

All the shooting had come to an end by the time he rounded the first knoll. Pat Moore and his four men had come on across the river and seemed to be undecided as to which way to turn in order to keep up the chase. One man still up there on the high trail behind started waving his big hat and shouting. It seemed to decide the old man, and he headed on, following the general direction Spurlock was riding.

Spurlock swung north at the other side of the canyon and for a time hugged the great overhang of rocks looming high above him. Topping a rise after his first mile he observed the activity taking place at the corrals. Men hiding in the house, and others who had kept out of old Pat Moore's sight, had now picked up courage to come boldly into the open. Horses were being saddled and led out of the high-beamed main corral. Rifle barrels flashed like silver streaks in the sunlight, and in a minute Spurlock could see eleven men turning up the river, Crash Garrison in the lead.

After that it seemed to be nip and tuck between Spurlock and the sheriff. He slowed down here and there, giving his bay every possible chance to take it easy and pick up his wind. Old Pat Moore and his men kept to their trail, appearing hell-bent on recapturing him dead or alive. Now and then there were a few bursts of shots, but it continued to be a one-sided affair.

Spurlock yet showed no signs of having anything to fight with, and merely ran for it whenever the guns crashed behind him and the bullets whipped up their little geysers of dust. It was not yet the place to display his artillery, but there were two old .45's underneath his shirt now, and a pair of well-filled cartridge belts were tied to his saddle horn.

HELP GET IT OVER, OVER THERE! BUY WAR BONDS!

It was nearly noon before he dared to cross the river, and once in the water it seemed that he had picked the most dangerous place he could find. Old Pat Moore had warned him, but he had known that he was at the right place when he came to a towering old cottonwood with a dead top blasted into tall white splinters by lightning. Once down a break here and into the water, there was no turning back.

Washed and churned, man and horse were slammed from side to side, and he was soaked to the skin when he finally got the bay across and turned up a sandy strip along the eastern edge of the water, under an overhanging bank. In a few moments Moore and his men had come up to fling out of their saddles and start shooting. They were still shooting into the river and splattering lead against the opposite bank when Spurlock rounded a bend and once more let the bay out, following the old sheriff's orders to a letter.

"GOING the only place he knows to go." Crash Garrison was tense when afternoon came. Spurlock still held his lead, but Garrison and five of his men were also ahead of the sheriff and his men. Walt Dutrow and Bill Hogg had streaked it on with three of the others at the first opportunity. Quick orders had been given and they were men who knew what they were to do. "It may not be a trick after all, but it won't stop me from pulling mine," Garrison had declared flatly.

Before they had gone another two miles Spurlock was like a man riding straight into the mouth of a giant bottle. Only a fool, Garrison reasoned, would do that—unless it was a case of not having any other place to go. Having been kept a prisoner on the Gunsmoke, Spurlock could not possibly know of any other way. He was heading for the old cabin and the big, natural corral. There was not a horse in the gorge up there now. All the infernal law in Wyoming could look in on it now if they wanted to, and damned little good it would do them! Damned little good, even if they found horses at some other time in the gorge—not when a man knew how to get bills of sales signed for ten horses, then change it to thirty-five or forty with just a few simple strokes of a pen!

At the mouth of the gorge Spurlock would expect to swing around the shoulder of high rocks and cross the shallows of the river just below the place where he had tied up the raft. All that was logical, and even now if he suspected a trap he would not be able to turn back. A man who had been down through this high, wild country only once could not possibly know of the places where he could slip through a wall of bushes and low trees here and there to hide in the rocks until pursuing men might pass without catching a sign of him.

Even old Pat Moore was out of his territory here. Outside of the river and those hills west of the shallows, there were only two or three secret trails to eastward by which the gorge could possibly be reached on horseback. The rest of the country to eastward was just one upfling and downfling, deadly for anything other than the wild animals that prowled it. If the law had ever found the place there was no known record of it. But today, damn him, the law was being led straight to it—a desperate stratagem that would teach Pat Moore the lesson of his life, if the old cuss didn't smell a rodent and turn back.

And Pat Moore and his men were never known to quit a trail until they had swept it as clean as a hound's tooth. Now and then on the high places Garrison could see them galloping their horses as if trying in almost desperate spurts to catch up. But Garrison was too smart for that to happen—yet! He knew when to gallop and when to take his time. Pat Moore would be kept at a safe distance until the right place came for him and his men to get ahead. It never once occurred to Crash Garrison that Moore was making it a point to keep the distance carefully spaced between them.

"EASY, now." Moore pulled up just before sundown and lifted his head, the sweat streaming from his horse's belly, the lather hanging like white lace to the beast's neck, flanks and rump. "Seems to me, boys, I heard the first bell of Ireland ring."

The sound of the shot had been faint and far away. Another followed it, then came a whole volley, the reports kicking up a rumbling echo that rocked down the high wall to their right. The river was below, itself a noisy turmoil as the water whipped down over the enormous rocks in its deep bed.

Pat Moore knew a lot more about this particular strip of country than most folks might have suspected. He hunted sorely wanted men and fought it out with them back here long before Crash Garrison had come to this country. In the past, outlaws had called this stretch of the river the Devil's Slide.

"It was just above the Slide," Moore muttered, half to himself and half to his old deputy beside him, "that I found that raft from the bridge the third mornin' after the holdup. A trackwalker said he was shore it was there, tied up below the bridge at sundown, before the holdup. Funny how little things can link up to fit out a picture yo're tryin' to frame. Look to yore guns, boys. Seems like the old blind mule's hit the woodpile. Pound yore leather an' keep yore eyes sharp!"

They were going in now, the shooting one

tremendous roll of gunfire ahead. Yells in the distance came with it. Soon they could hear horses slamming back and forth. It was music to Pat Moore's hairy old ears. It meant that a trap he had waited so long to bait was being sprung at last!

CHAPTER SIX

Rendezvous in Gunsmoke

IT WAS a rendezous Crash Garrison would never have wanted to keep, but he had ridden smack into it and could curse himself for it. It was as though he deliberately tried to help Pat Moore plan it all, and then had moved heaven and earth to carry it out.

Keeping on until he was at the mouth of a brush-choked hiding place just below the mouth of the gorge, he had intended to stop here and wait for the sheriff and his men to ride on. Walt Dutrow, Bill Hogg and the men with them had had no reason in the world to run into trouble. He had been sure of that. Their job had been to get here ahead of Spurlock and stop him, and they'd had plenty of time for that.

"If it's a trick," he had warned them, "then Spurlock will have a gun that Moore has given him. If it's not a trick he won't have one. No matter. Five to one is enough to take the Devil himself. Take him on into the cabin and tie him up, then break limbs and blaze the trail in so that Moore and his gang can't help following you. Then go into hiding. We'll stay in the clear until the gang's inside, then come on in behind them and plug the hole. The Devil's Slide out there in the river will do the rest afterwards."

"It's goin' to cause a big fuss." Old Walt had looked so worried his face had gone white. "Still, yuh might work it yore way, claimin' Spurlock had men hidin' back here. Yo're a a damn smart man when yuh wanta be, Crash, an' yore downright good at makin' up tales an' makin' people believe 'em. Me an' these boys ain't got nothin' to do but follow orders, I reckon."

Disaster had come suddenly here. The hiding place was less than eighty yards below the mouth of the gorge. Parting the brush carefully, Garrison had started to lead the way in. Once through the brush that hid a crack in the high wall, he would be in a round, deep pocket large enough to hold more than a score of horsemen.

It was a horse that stopped him. Somebody had been careless. The horse had smelled other horses coming, and had suddenly nickered. Garrison had reined to a halt, then was whipping back on his reins. Through the parted brush he had seen men, all armed, all waiting for him. He had recognized two or three faces in that one quick look, and knew them as Skull Rockers.

"Back out!" he had snarled. "It's a trap, damn 'im!"

He had tried to wheel back with an oath of alarm, his face suddenly bloodless. There was another place—a slightly smaller, brushy opening in the wall down the trail—where he could hide. Almost riding over the startled men behind him, he had headed for it. Then Crash Garrison was yelling like a fool and sawing for his guns as he tried to jam back for protection into the crazy crowd at his rear as he started his fight.

Andy Spurlock had stepped into the trail ahead of him—Spurlock now with heavy belts around his middle and a pair of six-shooters in his hands. Behind Spurlock came seven Skull Rockers with rifle barrels, carbines and double-barreled shotguns glinting in the lowering light.

"Better take it without the blood, Garrison!" Spurlock yelled. "You're surrounded! The others have already been taken prisoners in the mouth of the gorge! You haven't got a chance!"

A shot roared. Crash Garrison never knew whether it was one of his own guns going off or one in the hands of the panic-stricken men behind him. He had managed to turn his horse, and now he started to lead the way to the narrow trail bordering the river. He stopped, yelling like a maniac when he saw men with guns barring his way.

One man fired at Spurlock. It was suicide. A shot from the six-shooter in Spurlock's right hand splintered his collar bone and sent him pitching out of his saddle. He went down among the rearing and plunging horses, the hoofs slamming into him like flashing knives.

MEN were piling off their horses, now, their yells merging wildly. Garrison did not notice that his crowd was deserting him, that men were throwing up their hands, knowing that the fight was lost before it began. As a blind man would fight, he took a flip shot to the right and left, then plunged his horse for the bank of the river. For a moment it looked as if he had gone mad and was going to plunge right over the rim and down into the Devil's Slide.

It would have been absolute suicide if Garrison's horse had not swerved and slipped at the last moment, all four feet going from under him. Sheer accident seemed to throw Garrison clear of the horse. He came up like a bounding ball and started shooting—running along the high rim where one misstep would send him out into space.

Spurlock was moving in on him, shooting deliberately, not wasting lead any more than he could help. For some reason, he did not

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seem to be shooting to kill but only to stop the barrage of shots Garrison was throwing.

Pain suddenly staggered Garrison, seemed to explode from his left kneecap to every part of his body and limbs.

"Drop it, Garrison!" Spurlock shouted the warning. "You're through, you fool!"

And then, indeed, Crash Garrison was through. Two shots tore at him as one. A bullet plowed into his right wrist, racing up the forearm all the way to shatter the elbow. The second bullet raked like a terrible blow across his collar bone. With a choking sob, he slumped, and the fight had come to an end.

After that, he knew nothing for a long time.

At last, by lifting his head, he was able to see the light that came from sputtering candles thrust into the necks of whiskey bottles. Slowly it came to him. He was back in the old cabin in the hidden gorge, lying on one of the bunks there, but he could not imagine what he was doing in such a place. It took a minute before the sound of Walt Dutrow's whining voice brought back the memory of the fight.

"I didn't kill nobody, me an' Hogg didn't," Dutrow was whimpering. "Crash—"

"Didn't do no fightin' atall?" Old Pat Moore's voice was into it now. "All you an' Hoggy done was just to go along, maybe to sorter wipe Crash's nose in case it dripped."

"Yo're a liar!" That was Hogg, the crazy lunkhead! "We went right into that express car with Crash. We took the money an' helped bring it here; then we took it to Gunsmoke—"

"Damn you, you dirty dog!" Broken bones no longer held Crash Garrison silent. He sat up on the bunk, his one good eye glaring in the candlelight. "Shut your mouth, you fool!"

"Don't cuss 'im, Crash." Moore came back to the bunk now, with Spurlock beside him. "Him an' Walt got sorter bunged up in the scrap. I know where the money is, now. Knowed yuh got it two days after that holdup. Had enough on yuh to hang yuh this mornin', but I'm not such a hand at hangin' road agents without first gettin' back what they stole.

"The money's in a safe yo've got buried 'way deep in the cellar at the Gunsmoke," he went on relentlessly. "Two of the other fellas told me. And we'll get it if we have to blast it loose with dynamite. Yore days of hoss-stealin' an' slave-drivin' are over in this country, Crash. And if yore right arm was better"—a wide grin stretched across his face—"I'd have yuh shake hands with Andy Spurlock, here. I've been needin' me a young man a long time. Just a little while ago I made 'im a deppity. Kinda think he'll make me a good one—don't you, Crash?"

THE END

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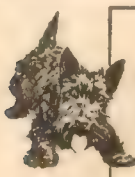

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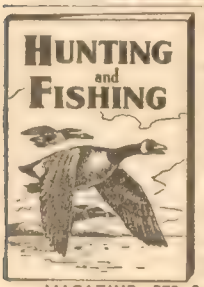

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(Continued from page 6)

some of our famous early Western marshals and star-toters were, quite naturally, exaggerations, since there is a natural human tendency to embellish such tales. However, from what I have read, and have heard in talks with oldtimers who were supposed to know what they were talking about, I believe there is not much doubt that the famous Wild Bill Hickok was about the fastest draw artist in the history of our pioneer West.

Wild Bill had invented a holster clip of spring steel, which he kept secret from all but a few of his closest friends. Once Wild Bill showed the famous Bat Masterson how the clip worked.

"Suppose you're reaching for your guns, Bat," Wild Bill said, "and I sight you at it"—and then he demonstrated how he would act.

His left hand caught the front of his coat at the bottom portion of the lapel and jerked it outward. Simultaneously his right hand darted in under his left arm and his hand closed over the butt of the six-shooter hanging there. His thumb clamped down on the hammer as he yanked it out. He did not pull the gun out of his holster, but merely twitched it sideways from the open spring that held it, and its muzzle darted forward.

Those two, swift motions were all he made—a quick throwing in of his hand and a quick withdrawal. His thumb automatically raised the hammer as he made the withdrawal movement—and the instant the muzzle pointed forward the thumb would release the hammer and the bullet would go to its mark.

Will Bill reputedly never took aim—some instinct or subtle sixth sense seemed to notify him of the exact instant the muzzle was in line with the target.

Bill figured that the spring enabled him to outshade any opponent on the draw by the hundredth part of a second—and as he remarked to Masterson on the occasion I have mentioned, "That much time is as good as a whole minute."

"Boot Foot Hill"

Mark Paston, an Arizona citizen, casts an interesting sidelight on the derivation of one of the West's most famous institutions, Boothill.

Dear Strawboss:

I wonder how many of the Branding Corral fraternity have heard the word, "Boot Foot Hill?" To the best of my knowledge, Boot Foot Hill was the real predecessor of

the West's famous Boothill, and the first Boot Foot Hill, I believe was the one established in the hell-roaring, and hell-raising, town of Newton, Kansas.

Dodge City is generally credited with giving the West its first "Boothill," although today Boot Hills are to be found in many localities. Although Newton's Boot Foot Hill antedates Dodge's Boot Hill, that name was given to it, some say, after the burying ground in Dodge had already become famous.

Incidentally, can any of your Branding Corral bunch tell me why old-timers of the West so hated to "die with their boots on?" Was it because they feared to pass on without benefit of shroud, coffin or funeral rites? Whatever the cause, there seems to be no doubt that the superstition—or whatever it was—really existed to a marked degree in those days when there was "no sheriff west of Newton, no God west of Dodge." And it was common to outlaw and lawman alike.

Take the case of Ed Short, a Deputy U. S. Marshal, and Black-faced Charley, a notorious Border bandit. Short, while hunting for members of the notorious Dalton boys, caught Charley and was taking him, handcuffed, to Wichita by train. He made the mistake of handcuffing Charley's wrists in front of him, however, and Charley grabbed the six-gun of the express car messenger just as Short came walking into the coach.

A spectacular gun duel ensued between these two men of iron nerve. They were still shooting at each other as the train slowed and stopped at the station at Waukomis. There, Black-faced Charley went rolling down the car steps and onto a loading platform, still clutching his six-shooter. Ed Short, too, would have fallen, had not the conductor, James Collins, caught him in his arms and helped him.

As Short lay on the platform, breathing his last, Collins asked him: "Have you any message, Ed?"

"Please take my boots off," requested Ed feebly, "and send for mother."

Within six feet of him lay Black-faced Charley. Charley, too, was drawing his last breaths. Fred E. Sutton, recognizing the outlaw, bent over him and asked: "Anything I can do for you, Charley?"

"Don't tell the folks back home. And—please pull my boots off, Fred," were Black-faced Charley's dying words."

Truth of the adage, "there's nothing new under the sun," is borne out for Jed Hunacker,

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a Colorado rancher, in the seeming similarity between the early Western road ranch and its modern counterpart, the so-called "tourist camp." Writes Jed:

Dear Strawboss:

My grandfather, Emphraim Hunacker, operated one of the earliest Western road ranches, and I am surprised at the similarity between that pioneer institution and the tourist camp of our 20th century express highways. The road ranch followed quickly on the heels of the stage stations; and, in fact, many of these ranches came to be selected, in time, for use as official stage hostelries. At one time, in the vicinity of Fort Cottonwood, there were ten of these ranches within twenty-five miles.

While many of the road ranchers, so called, did raise cattle and employed herders, many also ran eating-houses, sold merchandise, and retailed whiskey, some of it, I am afraid, pretty rotten stuff. The Overland Stage Company owned only about half the stations along its line; the rest were independently operated road ranches.

A typical ranch of this type was operated by Jack Morrow, a lanky, big-boned Westerner who lived on the ranch with his Indian wife. His ranch house was two and a half stories high and sixty feet long, and constructed of red cedar logs. The top story was divided into rooms for sleeping quarters; in addition, there was a section of the house where pilgrims could sleep on the floor, and do their own cooking.

I have heard my grandfather tell of the great bane of Overland stage drivers and stock-tenders of that day: Lice. The stage drivers commonly slept on hay ticks and for years on end their blankets never got a washing. But they had a notably successful method of ridding themselves of the "cooties," once they had become unbearable. In warm weather, when the lice multiplied by the thousands, the drivers would spread out their blankets on an ant hill. To the ants, lice were a very tasty dish. Thus blankets were "washed" very effectively without benefit of soap or water, but in a short time a fresh laundering job had to be done—at the first convenient ant hill!

Fancy food was not a specialty at most of the road ranches, and Mark Twain, in describing the food at one station, remarked that it consisted mainly of bread and bacon, with a drink that was called "tea" on the bill-of-fare, but more fittingly described as "slum gullion" by the cognoscenti. Passengers paid a dollar each for such a "meal." In some places, dried apple pie was offered as a desert—a delicacy that

became so common it finally palled on the palates of even the least fastidious. Finally, a passenger wrote a poem which became famous along stage lines throughout the West:

I loathe! abhor! detest! despise!
Abominate dried-apple pies;
I like good bread; I like good meat,
Or anything that's good to eat;
But of all poor grub beneath the skies
The poorest is dried-apple pies.
Give me a tooth-ache or sore eyes
In preference to such kind of pies.

The farmer takes his gnarliest fruit,
'Tis wormy, bitter, and hard, to boot;
They leave the hulls to make us cough,
And don't take half the peelings off;
Then on a dirty cord they're strung,
And from some chamber window hung;
And there they serve a roost for flies
Until they're ready to make pies.
Tread on my corns, or tell me lies—
But don't *pass to* me *dried-apple pies!*

Yet there was excuse for the poor fare offered by the road ranchers and stage station proprietors. They lived on a barren plains, beaten by savage winds and Winter, baked to hot, powdery dust in Summer, and were shut off from the outer world for months at a time—a monotonous existence broken only by the scheduled arrival of the coaches, from day to day.

The drivers of the coaches, incidentally, were a colorful lot—many of them real characters, as you might gather from such names among the roll of drivers as Whiskey Jack, Happy Jack, Rowdy Pete, Fiddler Jim, Tough Cuss from Bitter Creek, Badger Bill Bowser, Long Slim Jim, and Fish Creek Bill. Some of these men were college graduates; others little better than desperadoes. But all knew their business: they could snake out a whip with sufficient dexterity and accuracy to knock a fly off a lead horse without touching a hair! Usually they were garrulous enough when off duty; but when on the box, there seemed to be a kind of professional code among them which forbade unnecessary conversation. And they spoke a language all their own. At table, expressions such as "Sam, pour me a mule's ear full of coffee," or "Jake, waltz some of that petrified hard-

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tack over here," were typical. Another expression was, "I'm hongry enough to eat a jackass and chase the driver." They were a tough breed of hombres—they had to be!

Soddies and Sodbusters

Luther Eldredge of Nebraska, son of a pioneer, submits an interesting defense of the sod-type dwelling in which his family lived during his early years, claiming for it virtues which were not commonly advertised.

Dear Strawboss:

The early sod house may have been a humble kind of abode, but actually, from a strictly utilitarian point of view, it would have been hard to beat in meeting the needs of our Western agrarian trail-blazers. It had, in fact, certain outstanding advantages over any other kind of shelter of a semi-permanent nature which might have been erected. For example, it was cool in summer, warm in winter, and there was no danger of wind blowing it over or its being destroyed by prairie fires. Even the fireplaces were an asset, rather than a liability, for, since they too were built of sod, they were as "fireproof" as the soddy itself. And the average life for a good sod house was six or seven years.

Most of the early Western sodbusters were "money poor," and thus a soddy had an additional advantage, for its construction could hardly be considered a drain even upon the most meager exchequer. For instance, Elder Oscar Babcock, a Seventh-day Baptist Minister of North Loup, Nebraska, gave $2.78½ as the cost of the fourteen-foot soddy dugout he built for his family in 1872. He carefully itemized the cost as follows:

One window (8x10 glass)	$1.25
18 ft. of lumber for front door	.54
Latch and hanging (no lock)	.50
Length of pipe to go through roof	.30
3 bs. nails for door, etc.	.19½
Total	$2.78½

Even Governor Garber, of Nebraska, lived in such a house in 1870 and 1871 when, as a Civil War veteran, he came West to seek his fortune. He served as State Chief Executive from 1874 to 1876—one of the few great political leaders who can truly be said to have gone from "dugout to capitol."

Building of a proper sod house was really an art. A spade was used to cut the sod bricks to a length of about three feet. The line for the wall was drawn after dark, so it could be located by the north star. For the first wall layer, the three-foot bricks

were laid side by side around the proposed foundation, with the desired space left for a door. The cracks were then filled with dirt, and two more layers of "bricks" placed on top. Joints, just as in brick laying, were broken—every third course being laid crosswise of the others to "bind" them. Sometimes a builder would drive hickory withes down into the wall to reinforce the sods.

Rafters were made of poles and the sheetings of brush. A layer of prairie grass was laid over this, and on top of this sods for the roof were placed. From time to time, the dirt filling between the wall sods had to be renewed as rain washed it away. In time, growths of grass and sunflowers appeared on the roofs—triumphantly attesting to the truth that beauty can spring from even the humblest sources!

Treasure-Boxes

Although few Western stagecoaches of the early days were impervious to lead, there was at least one instance, according to Jim LeCount, who hails from the Dakota Black Hills country, of a treasure coach being lined with steel sheeting for protection against road agents.

Dear Strawboss:

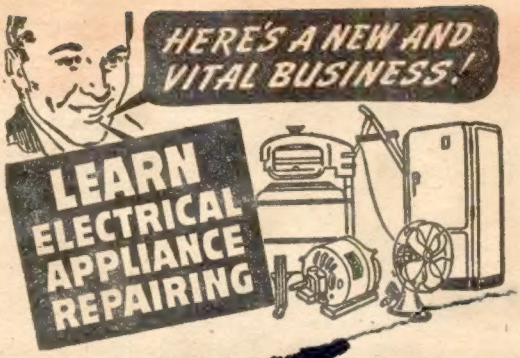
I ran across an old Black Hills old-timer recently, and we got into a discussion of stage hold-ups. To my surprise, I learned that as far back as the middle 1860's bullet-proof stage coaches were not unheard of!

The Black Hills gold strike, the old-timer told me, resulted in one of the express companies building a specially designed treasure coach, lined throughout with bullet-proof steel. The Company also provided the coach with port-holes, so that guards, sitting inside with the boxes of bullion at their feet, could easily stand off any attack of road agents without the slightest danger to themselves—or, incidentally, to the gold they were guarding. As much as $140,000 was transported on one occasion by this bullet-proof coach, and safely, too.

Early treasure boxes were made of heavy leather or of oak boards, strapped with iron bands and padlocked. Still later, light safes were transported, but even these proved unequal to the occasion, at times. Thus, with great amounts of gold dust and other valuables going out of the Black Hills country in the care of the express companies, the idea of the steel-sheathed treasure coach was finally hit upon, and proved a great success.

Hasta Luego!

—STRAWBOSS.



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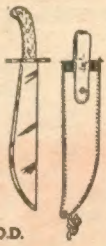

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★UP THE TRAIL★

JUST as, in the early days of the West, there were heroes whose deeds of valor were not limited to a proficiency with sixguns, so today, brave Americans in many parts of a war-torn world are valiantly, and often anonymously, displaying that red badge of courage which is not always confined to the men who fight with guns. Perhaps one of the least publicized of all American noncombat groups was the U. S. Army's Persian Gulf Command.

Among the crews that cowboyed the freight trains day and night from the port of Teheran—sergeants, corporals and privates—was Cpl. Harry Slick, fireman of a train that ran away. [illegible] of Slick's twenty-one cars were loaded with high-octane aviation gasoline; the eleven other cars contained explosives. The mountains of the Zagros range, through which Slick's train had to run, are higher than our Rockies—and the train was on a down-grade which dropped 2,500 feet when suddenly the brakes failed.

The engineer tried to shut off steam; the throttle broke. He applied the brakes—to no avail. When Slick's train hit level track, it was going ninety miles an hour!

Even after the train slowed down, it was rocking so violently at seventy miles an hour that the conductor lay on his belly and clung to the tender rail. Then as the train roared 'round a blind curve, three columns of smoke rose ahead—indicating trains. Two were on sidings, one, apparently, on the main track!

The engineer made one last desperate try to stop the train. Nothing happened. Thereupon, both engineer and conductor jumped. Slick stayed with his iron and steel bucking bronco! To his amazement the train went through the station unharmed; two of the smoke columns were from a double-header—two engines pulling one train. The main track was free!

Thirty-five miles from the station, Slick stopped the train. He received for his feat the Soldiers' Medal and the Russian Order of the Red Star.

Slick was akin to that group of pioneer Western railroadmen who, once, almost fell prey to Indian attack when their locomotive ran out of coal. Then, another courageous fireman, Jim Reed, performed a deed of valor comparable, in its way, to Slick's. While the conductor and engineer fought off the charging Redskins, Reed took an ax and ran back to a boxcar. Chopping furiously at the wooden sides, he managed to get enough wood to stoke the engine's boilers and permit the train to go on—but not before he himself had fallen with a Sioux arrow through his heart.

Corporal Slick's feat, and Jim Reed's both deserve to go down in the shining pages of American history. Both typify the breed of fighting American who had nerves of high-tempered steel, and the kind of fighting guts that builds railroads—and empires!

Every month, in the pages of *Star Western Magazine*, we try to bring back to vigorous life men of this lusty mold. Our next issue, featuring dramatic sagas, by Walt Coburn, Harry F. Olmsted and others, will be on sale July 11th!

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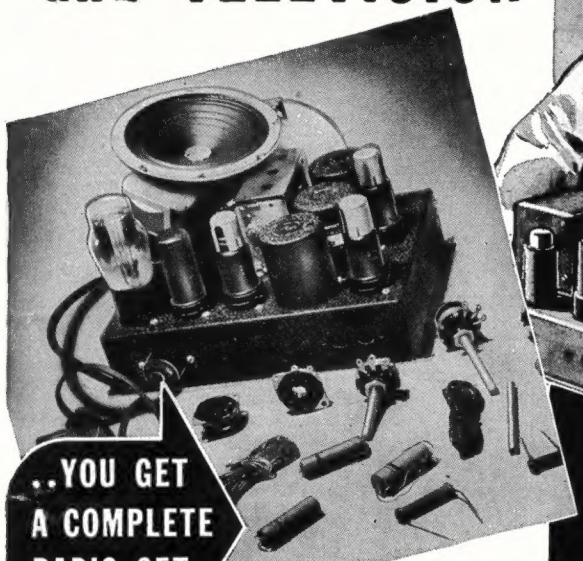

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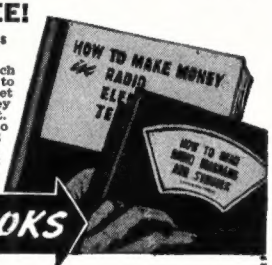

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